

## Chapter One

### Darkest Night

Harry lay on his bed at Privet Drive. It had been two weeks now since he had returned from school for the holiday, but time had ceased to have meaning for months now. The black haired, skinny youth lay for hours unmoving, staring at the ceiling or wall, depending upon which position he landed on the bed first, and willingly gave him self to the deepest of depressions. On occasion his Aunt would knock on his door, wrinkle her nose in disgust over the state of his room, and bring him a bowl of soup, which he would dutifully eat, but if it wasn't brought, he didn't look for it.

Normally, returning from school for the holiday is normal. Returning in a depressed mood is sadly not that unusual. Tragically, returning to a family that despises you is far from unheard of. But in this case, Harry was a wizard – a young powerful wizard, raised by his non-magical Aunt and Uncle who despised both him and the world of magic he schooled in.

His dark depression was due to the death of Sirius, his godfather. Sirius was his chance out of the blue for a new life away from the abuse of the Dursleys. Sirius Black was a living link to the parents he never knew, and a badly needed source of encouragement and protection. Even though he was forced into hiding for crimes he never committed, just to have him at owl's reach when he needed him gave him the strength to get through the challenges he faced.

Although a normal person would not of blamed themselves for what happened at the ministry of magic, Harry did tend to have a "hero complex", as his friend Hermione pointed out. If he had listened to her and checked to see if it was a trap, if he had gone to Dumbledore or the Weasleys first, if, if, if.

"If", groaned Harry out loud. For two weeks now he played the scenarios over and over again in his tortured brain. For two weeks now he replayed his godfather's death in his dreams. For two weeks he cursed the day his was born, the day Trelawney, the seer, made that damn prophecy about him, and cursed the fact he was so young, stupid, and inexperienced. For two long weeks he agreed with Snape,

his despised potions professor – perhaps he was merely the result of arrogance, preferential treatment, and uncanny luck.

It wasn't just Sirius. Cedric Diggory's death still haunted his dreams. The rebirth of Voldemort. His friend's injuries at the Ministry of Magic. He didn't even *try* not to blame himself – his friends were in danger because of him. He was the only chance the wizarding world had to defeat Voldemort, but by his mere existence, everyone and everything he loved was in danger.

Harry was stirred from his present bout of self-loathing by a tapping on his window. Hedwig, his snowy owl, was flapping at his window with a letter tied to her leg. With a sigh he opened his window, and took a long while to stroke her feathers and feed her treats before looking at the parchment she had carried. He had been writing every three days to his friends and the Order, as they demanded when leaving the train in June, so letters were fairly common now. At a glance he recognized Ron's writing, and with a shrug of apathy, he unrolled it and read:

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm glad the muggles are treating you all right. Hopefully Dumbledore can let you come and spend the rest of the summer after a few weeks. Nothing new here – everyone is hiding or laying low.*

*Have you heard from Hermione lately? She hasn't been writing much to me.*

*Ron*

The letter was typical Ron- didn't say anything of importance. Ron didn't like to discuss feelings, which made Harry grateful, but the letters were rather vague and empty – almost written out of obligation more than friendship. Hermione's letters could be annoying at times, but Harry could feel the sincere concern and friendship pouring through the words. He sat at his desk without hesitation and picked up a quill. Hedwig hooted with faint annoyance from her perch on the wardrobe, but Harry spoke with a smile, "don't worry girl – its just letters for Hermione and Ron – you can wait until you've eaten and

slept before taking them". Hedwig cooed softly and gratefully, and settled back down, closing her yellow eyes.

Harry jotted quick letters back to the both of his friends.

*Dear Ron,*

*I'd like to come as soon as it's possible – beg Dumbledore for me. I'm doing better now. How are the twins?*

*Harry*

*Dear Hermione,*

*How are you? I'm doing ok I guess. I'm very down about it all, but my Aunt and Uncle are leaving me alone. I spent the last two weeks indulging in a royal pity-party, but I am now feeling better, and I'm going to start my homework today.*

*Ron said you weren't writing much to him. Are you ok? I really look forward to your letters – let me know what is going on in the magic world.*

*Harry.*

Sighing yet again, Harry ran his fingers through his hair and winced at the feel. "I must look like Snape" he mused, "I need a shower really, really bad". Squaring his shoulders, he glanced out the window long enough to see Tonks walking by on duty, picked up a towel and headed to the bathroom.

One shower later, Harry felt the best he had in ages. Swiftly he gathered his laundry and carried it down to the basement. Once the wash was running, he headed to the kitchen after checking to see he was alone in the house. He made himself a decent meal, washed up, and then cleaned his room thoroughly. Sirius wouldn't want him to mourn forever, and beating himself up wasn't accomplishing anything. The prophecy made it clear – kill Voldemort or be killed. If he was going to prevent another killing like Sirius, or Cedric, or his parents, he had to be trained and ready.

Harry checked the news on the telly and the paper for news that might be linked to Voldemort, and was pleased to see nothing seemed to be out there. Then he picked the lock to his old cupboard and removed several schoolbooks. Back to his room, which was now clean and clean smelling, he decided to devote the rest of his stay at Privet Drive to working hard on his homework. "Hermione will be so pleased" he smiled to himself, "if she doesn't have a heart attack".

The next few hours were devoted to charms. Harry ground his teeth with frustration – the limit on using magic out of the house was so unfair. Under age wizards were not allowed to do magic outside of school, and the Ministry had ways of knowing when a minor used their wand. How can you do homework on magic if you can't *do* the magic? Kids growing up in a wizard home had an unfair advantage – the ministry couldn't distinguish between what the parents do and what the kids do, but children of muggle house holds were forced to live as muggles when home. He pondered the time he was given a trial for defending himself, and the time Dobby the house elf almost got him expelled by levitating a cake, without a wand. Why hadn't the ministry ever nailed him for the accidental magic he performed before he knew he was a wizard? It didn't make any sense.

As the sun started to set he could hear noises down stairs – the Dursleys were arriving home and dinner was being prepared. Hedwig woke up, drank deeply from her now sparkling water cup, and flew down to his shoulder. She stuck her leg out to him letting Harry know she was ready for work. Gratefully, Harry tied the two letters on, asked her to deliver Hermione's first, and let her out his open window. Night was falling, and Harry felt like an early bedtime would be good. He stretched, yawned, undressed and worked seriously at clearing his mind before drifting off to sleep. Tomorrow was a new day – the start of a more productive summer.

## Chapter Two

### Breaking of Dawn

Harry was having a lovely sleep - deep, refreshing, and dreamless for the first time in weeks. His body, mind and face totally relaxed, one could almost see his spirit renewing if they watched. And someone was watching him.

A small, bent and wizened figure apparated in the room, silent as a ghost. He glanced around the room and bent over the sleeping Harry to ascertain the identity of the snoozing boy. Swiftly, with a pointy-toothed smile, he waved his long, gnarled fingers in intricate movements at the door, windows, walls and floor. Nodding to himself, he then held his hands, palm out and scanned the room, examining various colors of glowing auras that formed around some objects – books, Harry's wand, and the sneakoscope Ron had brought him from Egypt. Evidently content with what he saw, the strange figure sat down in the chair by Harry's bed, and gently cleared his throat.

Harry, a young man disturbingly use to danger, instantly awoke. Consciousness and action working in the same instance in time, he rolled and aimed his wand at the seated and amused figure, who simply waved a finger and sent the wand gently floating out of Harry's grip. Harry gaped, swallowed, and said quietly in a low voice "Griphook?"

"Greetings, Mr. Potter." The goblin smiled, showing an alarming number of the aforementioned pointed teeth. "I apologize for barging in on you". Harry glanced nervously at the door in the direction of his relative's room. "Do not worry – I put silencing charms on your room – we may speak freely."

"Er.... Ok" Harry shook his head to clear it a few times. He sat fully up on his bed, tucking his legs under to keep his feet warm. He looked curiously at Griphook and mumbled, "give me a couple minutes to wake up, ok?"

"Coffee or tea?" asked the goblin. "We have a lot to discuss, and I wanted to be assured of privacy when we did so. We goblins do not

make a habit of waking our customers in the middle of the night, but I think you will find the interruption to your rest worth it”.

“Coffee, please” Harry said gratefully, while reaching for his ratty but warm bathrobe. He watched fascinated as Griphook waved his long finger gracefully and conjured a steaming pot of coffee, two mugs, condiments, and a plate piled with cookies, pastries, and snacks. With his other hand he created a table to rest the tray of refreshments on, and a comfortable over-stuffed chair, which he then gestured to Harry to make himself comfortable in.

“Um, Griphook? I won’t get in trouble for all this magic, will I?” Harry looked at the coffee and chair nervously. Another trial was not what he wanted to deal with, after finally getting back on his feet after two weeks of self-indulgent sorrow.

“No, Mr. Potter. Goblin magic is undetectable by most wizards. The Ministry will not pick up anything, I assure you. Also, as you probably noticed, goblins do not use wands, which leave distinctive magical registers. Now, make yourself comfortable and let’s have a talk about your finances”. Griphook himself took a mug of coffee – Harry noted that he drank it black and mused for a moment if goblins could possibly like fussy sweet things, and helped himself to coffee and a tempting fat cookie.

Griphook eyed Mr. Potter with a look that reminded Harry of Crookshanks, Hermione’s ugly cat/kneazle mix, bird watching. He didn’t feel nervous, but he felt like he was being examined closely. “Mr. Potter, why haven’t you answered our letters regarding Mr. Blacks’ will? For that matter, you have never come into the bank for your yearly account reports”. Harry was lucky to have an empty mouth at that moment, for he sputtered and gasped.

“What?” Harry said. “I have no idea what you are talking about! What letters?”

“Ah” said Griphook, nodding to him self. “That’s what we at Gringotts were afraid of. Please tell me, Mr. Potter – how many letters have you received from us over the years? Say from your eleventh birthday, on?”

“I’ve never gotten anything from Gringotts!” Harry’s voice was rising in excitement. “What should I have been getting from you?”

The goblin lowered his mug of steaming coffee to his chest and looked him straight in the eyes. “Monthly statements, a copy of your parents will soon after visiting us for the first time, three letters regarding the will of Mr. Sirius Black, invitations for yearly account reviews...” he ticked off the list on his long fingers, “...shall I go on?”

“No, I’ve got the message” Harry sat back down, agitated but listening. “Someone has been screening my mail and keeping my money matters from me I guess. But who?”

“Tell me, Mr. Potter” continued Griphook “are you missing other mail that you are aware of? Do you hear from your friends on a regular basis?” Harry nodded. “How about your fans? Has the amount of fan mail and gifts increased or diminished this summer?”

Harry’s mouth hung open and he did a decent imitation of a goldfish, gulping and gasping for a minute or two. “FAN MAIL? You’ve got to be joking – I’ve never received fan mail! Who’d write me?” But even as he said it, his face turned unconsciously toward his Aunt and Uncles’ bedroom. They certainly wouldn’t want him to know about any admirers, but could they have hidden owl deliveries for years? Also, his Aunt and Uncle seemed sincere in their deep rooted belief that Harry couldn’t possibly be famous or good for anything.

“Well, Mr. Potter” growling Griphook in a low voice “do you not find it strange that the whole wizarding world knows you, knows of your heroism and exploits, or believes lies written of you in the Daily Prophet that aren’t factual, and yet you never get mail about it, except at Hogwarts? After ridding the world of Voldemort for a time, do you not think that there would be many grateful people who would remember your birthday, or the anniversary of the loss of your parents? Who indeed has kept this from you.”

Harry sat back in his chair still gaping slightly. “I take it you have an idea?” he asked after a while.

“Well”, said Griphook, with a snarlish smile, “the first place I’d look would be my magical guardian”.

“Magical guardian?” Harry asked, puzzled. “What is a magical guardian? I don’t have one that I know of”.

Griphook looked less than pleased. He frowned and reached into a leather satchel that was sitting on the floor by where he was sitting. “Mr. Albus Dumbledore made himself your magical guardian when your parents died – here is the paperwork on that. We found it slightly irregular at the time, seeing that he wasn’t going to adopt you, to claim custody of you, but it was properly filed with the Ministry, and we goblins tend to keep our noses out of other peoples’ business.”

Harry glanced over the parchment, which proclaimed Dumbledore to be his magic guardian, and benefactor in case Harry died. “What does this give him legal right to do?” he asked, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

The goblin smiled, but it resembled a snarl more than warmth. “This document gives Mr. Albus Dumbledore the right to everything a parent can do, Mr. Potter – handle your finances, pay himself a salary for ‘caring for you’, screen your mail, choose your living place – shall I go on? Ever since the settling of your parents will, he has been paying himself 2,000 galleons a year maintenance from the Potter vaults, and removing substantial amounts of money. The only thing he cannot do, which was attempted on several occasions, was to sell property in the Potter estate, or have access to the vaults. He only controls money until you tell him to stop.”

Gnarled hands lifted the cup to drink once again, as the shrewd glittery eyes looked over the young human. Harry was pale with obvious anger and confusion. Taking a gulp of coffee of his own, Harry took a deep breath and spoke in a serious tone “OK, Griphook – I’ve got a ton of questions. I don’t know where to begin – um, how many vaults and what property? I was only aware of one vault – the one I get my school money from. Can I see my parents will? Can I stop Dumbledore’s guardianship? What about Sirius’ will?” He winced at using his godfather’s name, but watched the goblin expectantly.

“One thing at a time, Mr. Potter. It is only 1 A.M. – we have plenty of time to discuss these matters, and I feel sure you will want to meet more with us to iron out details. First, let me extend the deepest

apologies from Gringotts' Bank. We take serious pride in protecting our customers, and we have not done that for you. Once we realized you were not being properly represented or cared for, we started an investigation. We will address each and everyone one of these issues."

"First of all" Griphook continued, pulling out another sheaf of parchment from his bag, "I have listed your assets as of 5:05 P.M. yesterday. The vault you visit yearly is merely your school fund established by your parents. As you can see" he handed the parchment over to Harry, "you have 3 Potter vaults, and the properties listed."

Harry's eyes bugged out of his head as he read the list. He was so thankful the Weasleys couldn't see this – it was hard enough getting gold out of his school vault and having to deal with Ron's jealousy. He tried to give money to the Weasleys on several occasions, once even transferring some without telling them, but it was returned the next day with a polite thank you note. They were proud people. The extent of the wealth just floored him – over 12 million galleons, rare books, jewels, magical items and more. As property went, he owned not just Godric's Hollow, but also had an ancestral manor home. Harry was one wealthy wizard.

Griphook allowed himself a brief smile at Harry's shock. This was one of the more pleasant aspects of his position with the bank. But he turned serious again when he continued. "Now here is a copy of your parent's last will and testament. You should have been given a copy when you turned eleven." He handed it over to Harry, who took it with trembling hands.

Wading through the 'legalese', Harry felt the tears welling in his green eyes. In a nutshell, the will stated that in case of both their deaths, Harry was to be raised by (in turn, depending upon survival as this was in war times), Sirius Black, The Longbottoms, The Bones, or the Tonks. The will clearly stated that under no circumstances should Harry be given to the Dursleys to be raised. There was also no mention of Dumbledore anywhere in the document. Financially, everything would be left to Harry with a 2,000 galleon a year stipend going to the family raising him.

Rubbing his forehead again, Harry looked at Griphook questioningly. "Is there some chance that Dumbledore never read my parents will?"

Griphook shook his head. "The very next morning after your parent's death, the bank investigated. We learned of Mr. Reubeus Hagrid taking you from the home and bringing you to the Dursleys. When questioned, our representative learned he was acting under Dumbledore's orders, but when he confronted him with a copy of the will, we now understand Mr. Dumbledore altered our representative's memory so we were led to believe he had removed you from the Dursleys and followed your parent's wishes. It wasn't until recently, when your accounts came up for review, we started to realize things were not, shall we say, kosher?"

"But why?" asked Harry weakly. "Why would Dumbledore do this – allow me to be raised by these monsters? I could have had a real home! I know Sirius was in Azkaban and the Longbottoms incapacitated, but Susan Bones could have been my sister, or Tonks! I could have had a real family". Harry bit his trembling lip, resolving not to cry. "Have I truly had to live here just because of my blood protecting me?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Potter?" asked Griphook cautiously.

With a shuddering breath Harry started to explain. "Dumbledore told me my mother died trying to save my life, which put a powerful protection charm on me. By living with a blood relative several weeks a year, it gives me magical protection from Voldemort and his gang."

"What utter nonsense" snorted Griphook derisively. "Nothing of the kind. Yes, your mother's sacrifice protected you from Voldemort, and gave you some interesting side affects, but the only thing protecting you here are the wards placed by wizards. No more, no less. The same wards can be placed anywhere."

Harry was angry now. He leapt to his feet and started pacing the room, punching his fist into his hand repeatedly. Griphook gave him time to calm himself; quietly sipping coffee and watching him regain control. Finally Harry cooled down enough to sit again and face the goblin. "Fine" he spoke through gritted teeth. "Obviously I can not trust Dumbledore. Why would he do this – what did he gain?"

Griphook snorted and flashed his fearsome teeth. “That’s easily answered, Mr. Potter. First of all, the money is nothing to sneeze at. Our records show that since declaring his guardianship, he has taken 1,057,903 galleons from you. And wizards would know of the child maintenance money for keeping you – he could legally keep that money for himself and the Dursleys would never know there was money that could have been theirs. Mr. Dumbledore is not poor, and has been putting your money away all these years, not touching it. Perhaps he plans to fund the upcoming war? Secondly, I think by controlling you, he is controlling a weapon of his choosing. A weapon is a powerful thing – it can change governments and destinies. You have been prophesied as the one to save the wizarding world, am I correct? By keeping you poor and miserable, no doubt you see him as some sort of savior every September first? ”

Harry made a derisive sound. “I use to. I started figuring out last year how manipulative he was, and really resenting how he kept me from knowing what was going on all the time. He really never seemed to be there when I needed him – I really stopped trusting him completely a while back. Seems like I had good reason.” Harry folded his arms across his chest, glaring out the window. “Fine” he said suddenly. “I don’t care about the money he took – I seem to have plenty. But how to I get him out of my life?”

“Mr. Potter, I will list your options, and if you wish, give you my advice”. Harry nodded appreciatively and waited for him to continue. “The most obvious option is to naturally have him claimed an inadequate guardian. He has broken several laws regarding your care – it would be easy to terminate the guardianship, and perhaps even press charges. You could have him fired as headmaster, if you wish. This is not the course I recommend however.”

Harry took a moment to fantasize Dumbledore in a striped jail suit, behind bars with a large boyfriend named Bubba. With a tight smile he nodded and said, “Please continue”.

“I recommend doing nothing at the moment” Griphook paused and raised his finger in the air to stop Harry’s angry interruption. “At least it will appear that way. Let me continue, Mr. Potter. Mr. Dumbledore is an extremely powerful and manipulative wizard. If he realizes “the

jig is up”, to borrow a Muggle phrase, he will do whatever it takes to resume his plans. He will kidnap you, hide you away, seize control of all your liquid assets – I have no doubt of it. If you pretend you know nothing of this, we will monitor both your account and his very closely. As it stands, he has enough money to pay back every knut he stole from you – we will freeze those funds without telling him. If he tries to empty his vaults, the money in question will be charmed to automatically transfer to your own. The money is earning the same interest in both accounts – it will not harm anything to leave things ‘as is’. As to the guardianship, I have a proposition after we discuss some other matters. You do need to break from Mr. Dumbledore’s influence, but you need other things more – much more.”

Griphook paused and took a breath and some coffee. He passed over the pastries for a rather tough chunk of meat jerky. Harry didn’t want to know what beast had provided the meat, but the goblin was shredding the snack with a ferocious enjoyment that was fascinating to watch.

“Now, about the last will and testament of Mr. Sirius Black” said Griphook, and Harry gulped guiltily – he hadn’t thought about Sirius for a couple hours now, which made him feel ashamed and relieved at the same time. “We can not read the will without all parties present. Mr. Dumbledore has insisted that as your guardian he is to be your representative, and that you are too bereaved and do not wish to attend. We have refused to allow him entry to the reading. We would like to schedule it for this Thursday, and have you present in a portrait to take part in the reading. We have a special painting of a crowded room of wizards that is in one of our larger offices, and in these occasions it is simple to charm yourself to be one of the background people – unnoticed by the occupants in the room, but fully cognizant and able to see and hear everything. Mr. Dumbledore will know you are in this house, as your body will still be here, and nobody at the reading will be able to report back that you were there.”

Harry grinned. “That sounds cool – sort of like spying! Will any of us have to say anything?”

“No, just attend and listen, and then sign papers afterwards. I personally will be here with you during the reading, standing guard

over your physical body, and witnessing the forms for you to sign when you are back.” Again the glittering eyes watched Harry’s face carefully, searching for signs of fear or weakness.

Griphook cleared his throat before continuing. “Now before I get to my proposition, I have a request from you”. Harry looked up surprised at the goblin – what did he have that a goblin could want? “I would like you to tell me about yourself – tell me everything that has happened to you in regards to being a wizard and your childhood. With your permission, I’d like to engage you in a type of occumency. I will not read your thoughts – only share the mental images of the memories you choose to share. Think of it as an invisible penseive”.

Fear gripped Harry for a brief moment. Occumency with Snape was nothing less than the brutal rape of his mind. But Snape loathed him, and Griphook, on the other hand, always treated him with respect and was obviously looking out for his best interest. Harry smiled as calmly as he could. “OK, Griphook – I trust you”.

Harry and Griphook spent the next couple of hours reliving Harry’s less-than pleasant childhood, spending particular time in each of the instances Harry could recall of using ‘accidental magic’. The shared memories with Griphook were surprisingly gentle – not the brain bludgeoning that Snape delivered, but a soft breeze of inquiry gently whispered across his mind. There was no embarrassment or force, and Harry was totally at ease.

Next they covered Harry’s school years. Griphook seemed to pay particular attention to anything to do with Dumbledore, Snape, his friends, and other personal interactions. He seemed to dwell a lot on Ron and Ginny, or anything that was dangerous. When they finally finished with the pain of Sirius’s death, Harry gave a heartfelt sigh and collapsed back in the chair. The goblin shook his head and said, “You have been sorely treated in your life, Mr. Potter”.

Griphook leaned forward and took Harry’s two hands in his own. Harry was startled at such a gentle gesture from such a warrior-like creature, but faced him in the eyes to see what he wanted. The goblin said quietly “now let me share myself with you”.

Harry was instantly transported into a penseive-type state – traveling through the childhood and life of Griphook the goblin. Time must of moved at different rates for the dream-like state and reality, because if questioned afterwards Harry would swear he shared years and years worth of memories with Griphook, but only a few short minutes had passed. Harry got to live the magical world through the eyes of goblinkind, and it was jarring, to say the least. He got to experience the lust of battle, the pride of business, and the shameful treatment from the humans. The long tortuous months of history with Professor Binns and the goblin wars was so one-sided and inaccurate it was an embarrassment to education. The goblins had an amazing and rich culture spanning thousands of years before the wizards ever broke from the muggles and crafted their clumsy magic.

Clumsy was the word for it. Harry was amazed to see the difference in goblin magic and wizard magic. Where most wizards were useless without a wand, and dependant on the Latin tongue for spell casting, goblins seemed to reach down into themselves and weave magic out of their very souls. Words and wands were silly and superfluous. That goblins were not 'allowed' to use wands was a matter of much amusement to the goblin community. Apparating for goblins was quiet and accurate – none of the loud and jarring banging and falling that wizards prided in. It also left no magical 'register' behind, so it couldn't be traced or spied upon. Creating from nothing was as simple as imagination for the goblins, where humans had to rely on transfiguration.

As the intimacy of memory sharing faded and Griphook release Harry's hands, Harry stared at the goblin with amazement and respect. "Griphook, I'm sorry I never asked you or anyone at Gringotts what goblins are like. I never really thought about it, and that's wrong".

Griphook smiled, showing his teeth that Harry now understood was a source of pride for a goblin. "If you had asked, we would not have shared. But please know, Mr. Potter. That 'prophecy' that Mr. Dumbledore shared with you is not entirely true. He altered it to throw both Voldemort and yourself off track. We goblins have our own prophecy concerning you, and it reads differently. We need you, and we need you strong and well-trained – not crippled and clueless as

Mr. Dumbledore has kept you. We goblins dream of a day when all magical beings can live in the world as equals. So," Griphook smiled even wider, showing even more of the dangerous teeth, "how would you like to be trained in goblin magic?"

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## Chapter 3

### The Will of the Most Noble House of Black

It was 6:30 in the morning when Griphook parted. With a promise to arrive early Thursday to work the reading of Sirius' will, and a warning not to let on to anyone what he now knew, he took his leave. Harry removed his robe, settled back into bed and fell asleep immediately.

Harry woke near noon totally refreshed. He pondered over everything Griphook told him during the night, feeling his emotions swing from elation to rage. He sincerely hoped Dumbledore wouldn't be showing up anytime soon – he didn't think he could hide his new found knowledge from him. Obviously the ancient wizard was not a friend, but he didn't want him as an enemy either.

The week flew by with the buoyancy of a better attitude. Harry still missed Sirius deeply, but he no longer blamed himself for his death. With the realization that Dumbledore was acting in selfish interests and not Harry's, things that happened in the past five years started making more sense in a sinister way. Although still devoting several hours a day to homework, Harry started keeping a muggle notebook of memories and observations:

Year One Hogwarts

Why did D leave me with the Dursleys?

To make me see him as savior/dependant on him?

To keep me magically weak?

To keep me from my finances?

Why did the Ministry not punish me for prior magic to year one? Or even contact me?

Why no visits or owls from anyone during my childhood

To keep me clueless and weak?

How did D get my father's cloak?

Why does D let Snape be so cruel and unfair to me (and others?)

How can D allow such bad teachers in Hogwarts?

Snape

Trelawney

Binns

Filch

Quirrell/Voldemort

Hagrid (sorry, my friend!)

Why did no one at Hogwarts realize I was starved and beaten?

Year Two Hogwarts

D knew Riddle was the heir – why did he not tell everyone?

D is a master occ/len – he KNEW I could hear the basilisk in the walls

Why did he not warn the students or teachers?

He allowed it to happen both times!

Could D hate muggles and mixed bloods?

D let the whole school think I was the heir

D hired Lockhart knowing he couldn't teach us anything

Why didn't D panic when there was no word from me all summer?

Year Three Hogwarts

D HAD to know Sirius was innocent – why did he leave him in jail?

D HAD to know the dementors were targeting me – why did he not protect me?

D has to know the secret passages – why didn't D block them?

Year Four Hogwarts

D must of known Moody/Crouch was fake

Why didn't he disqualify me? How can it be a legally binding contract if I didn't enter?

How could he allow the Daily Prophet to attack me and my friends?

Year Five Hogwarts

Why did he continue to keep Mrs. Figg a secret?

Why did he trust Fletcher?

Why did he keep Sirius locked up?

The notebook was Harry's proof, organizing his thoughts, showing him how fake Dumbledore was. Who was the real Albus? And most importantly, what were his plans for Harry?

Thursday dawned bright and clear. Harry showered and ate before the Dursleys woke. The will reading was to be at 11, and Griphook would be arriving at 10. He paced the floor nervously, wondering what it would be like to see the world from inside a painting. Would he feel squashed flat? Would he feel anything? Would anyone notice him? Harry assumed Tonks would be at the reading of the will, but what about the Malfoys? He shuddered in disgust.

Griphook arrived promptly at 10, apparating silently into Harry's bedroom. With a feral grin, he swiftly enchanted the door, windows, walls, floor and ceiling. Nodding at Harry he smiled and said, "We have silence to work in now. I also took the liberty of warding the door so you will not be disturbed by your relatives while the reading is going on."

Harry sat on his bed while Griphook conjured a comfortable chair to sit in. He looked at Harry and asked "Do you have any questions before we start?"

"Well yes!" said Harry in a hurry. "What will it feel like? Can anyone see me? Will Dumbledore interrupt? How do we end it? Is there any chance I can get stuck in the painting?" Harry's eyes were wide with excitement.

Griphook eyed him with an expression that must have been amusement. It was hard to read him. "Mr. Potter, you will lie on your bed when ready. I will put you to sleep and when you wake, you will be in the painting, toward the rear of seven wizards. There will be no pain or discomfort, but yes, you will be able to feel, so don't start a fight with them. They are use to having company, so do not worry. Mr. Dumbledore has been denied admittance to the reading, and is quite put out over it, but cannot come uninvited. As far as I am aware, he doesn't know it's today. When the reading is over, all you have to do is leave through the red door in the back of the painting – you will wake up here. That way you can leave anytime, and will not be "stuck", as you put it, if I should die while sitting here."

"Sounds great but please don't die," Harry grinned, bouncing up and down like a chipmunk on espresso, "I'm ready when you are". He made himself comfortable on his bed, folded his hands over his stomach in what he hoped looked casual and relaxed, and took a deep breath. Griphook stood and leaned over him, smiled a closed-mouth smile that for once didn't show many sharp teeth, and gently touched Harry's forehead with one long, graceful finger.

"I wonder when something is going to happen" Harry thought to himself, eyes closed in anticipation. "How long will it take me to fall asleep?" He was surprised to feel what he assumed to be Griphook brush against his arm, and opened his eyes. To Harry's astonishment, he wasn't in bed anymore, but standing in a room with seven other wizards and witches. They were milling around, looking at Harry with amusement.

"We wondered when you were going to open your eyes, young sir!" A kindly looking elderly witch said to him.

Harry stared around him in amazement. He was in a room about 12 foot square. In back of him was the red door that he assumed was his way back to reality, and the walls to his left and right had varnished oak doors. The furniture in the room was sparse and rustic, and as the occupants were wearing robes, it was impossible to choose a time period the painting was done in. The strangest thing about the room was the huge window taking up the wall in front of him. The people kindly moved aside for Harry as he walked up to it to gawk. It was a window – he reached out to touch it and was surprised to see it was flexible and clear (*“it must be the varnish on the paint!”* he thought to himself), and it looked into a conference room where one huge goblin with a head the size of a car, wearing a look of what Harry now recognized to be amusement, looked back at him. The size caught Harry by surprise, until he realized that paintings were rarely life sized, and he now existed in a smaller scale.

“Is everything all right, Mr. Potter?” the goblin asked portrait-Harry. “Can you hear me and see everything clearly?”

“Yes sir,” gulped Harry. This was up there with other firsts in his life.

“First time in a painting, my dear?” asked another witch gently. Harry nodded and she beamed at him. “We don’t get many young visitors! Tell us a little about yourself!”

Harry spent the next half hour or so very pleasantly, getting to know the seven beings of the painting. The painting was of a reunion of wizard accountants from 300 years ago (give or take). They commissioned the painting specifically to be used for Gringotts, finding it amusing to help the bank they had all admired. He learned that paintings are not full copies of a person – how much of the personality of the person was in the painting depended upon the magic and talent of the painter, and the purpose it was to be used for. These wizards and witches were basically recordings of the people who lived centuries before at the time they were painted – they could learn and grow with the times up to a point, but new facts would fade from their memories very quickly.

The seven kindly briefed Harry on how to remain inconspicuous in back of them, and how not to call attention to him self. They gave him

a witch's hat and wig to wear, so if anyone was looking, they certainly would not identify the 4" high blond witch as Harry Potter. And at that, the door to the conference room opened, and the hopeful and mourning benefactors of Sirius Black filed into the room.

Everyone in the painting craned their heads to see who was entering, and Harry got the impression they weren't curious so much, as wanting to make it possible for Harry to do so without standing out. He smiled gratefully and watched as Remus, Tonks, Narcissa & Draco Malfoy, Hermione, Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Fred, and George came into the room. They milled around the large table in the center of the room, and sat down. Nobody gave more than a casual disinterested glance at the painting Harry watched from. It took everything he had not to wave at everyone – he could just hear the twins now *"Neat! How'd you get there? Can we make one for the shop?"*

Harry looked at the people around the table. Mrs. Malfoy held herself with the same formal stiffness as she had at the Quiddich World Cup, her expression always a split-second from a sneer. Draco slumped in his chair looking totally bored, rebellious and indifferent. Remus was more down than usual, with Tonks patting his arm and looking miserable. Hermione was glancing to the door frequently, and he distinctly heard her ask Ron if he knew if Harry was coming, who shrugged and looked almost as apathetic as Draco. Harry was pleased to see Hermione and Mrs. Weasley dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs and Mr. Weasley and the twins with appropriate sorrowful and serious expressions. But it was Ron who really shocked Harry. Ron wasn't wearing the expression of a person in mourning. He looked jealous, and seething with barely contained anger. He kept glancing around the room, tapping his fingers on the table impatiently. Harry made a mental note to keep a guard on what he said to Ron in the future, and felt his heart break just a bit with knowing his first real friend might not be much of a friend at all.

Soon the door opened again, and Harry could see the disappointment on Hermione's face as the same goblin who asked him how he was doing entered the room carrying what appeared to be a large portrait draped with a black cloth, which he placed against the wall opposite Harry's painting, on an easel. Harry gasped – he couldn't help himself

– but was relieved to note that enough people in the room had made noise too, and nobody heard his reaction. He knew who had to be under that cloth, and it was going to hurt to see and hear him again.

The goblin cleared his throat and waited for everyone to quiet. Standing next to the covered painting, he began, “Welcome everyone, to the last will and testament reading of Mr. Sirius Black. Recent events have transpired that cleared Mr. Black’s name of any crimes he was accused of, and makes the closure of his accounts possible. On that note, may I present to you, Mr. Sirius Black.” And with that, he pulled off the cloth to reveal a full length portrait of Sirius, painted sometime recently if hair length was any clue.

Sirius grinned broadly and looked around the room. “At last!” he chortled, “what’s the point of paying for an expensive painting if you can’t even use it? So, as you all know, I snuffed it. It was a dirty deal – Sharpclaw here has kept me up to date with the details since I awoke. Don’t worry, Bella, may she rot soon, was disinherited before I bought the farm.”

Harry felt the hot tears pouring down his face. He only had eyes for Sirius, drinking him in. It was so unfair that he seemed so alive, so, so *himself*, and yet Harry knew that he was merely a clever recording – an interactive doll. One of the witches standing next to him gently squeezed his hand, and he smiled appreciatively, never taking his eyes off his godfather’s image.

Sirius looked around the room sharply. “Where’s Harry?” he demanded.

Sharpclaw bowed to the painting. “Mr. Potter will have to be addressed at a later point in time. We are attempting to make arrangements.”

“Did Dumbledore have something to do with it?” growled Sirius, glaring darkly.

“We will speak after the reading, Mr. Black. Rest assured, when a goblin says they are working on it, it is indeed being worked on.” Sharpclaw clasped his hands together and stood at attention next to the portrait.

“Ok, well on to business. When his reading is done, I will be given to Harry, who will hopefully give any of you access to me that wishes. Keep in mind, I’m only a painting, and not the real deal. The real me is hopefully in paradise and not coming back. I have all the memories of Sirius up through the day before we died, but my responses are my own, not his, and only based on how he probably would have answered. Try not to mourn for me too much.”

Sirius turned toward where Narcissa was sitting, and Draco sat straight in his seat. “Hello, Narcissa. I’m really disappointed in your choice of husbands you know. His activities in the Death Eaters are well known, as is his bullying and heavy handed ways in the Ministry.” Narcissa’s back grew visibly stiffer, and she gave Sirius a dirty look. “You were my favorite cousin – a real nice witch when we were in school. Then you married that jerk. Well, I’m leaving you 1 million galleons, to be transferred to a private vault. It is not linked to the Malfoy money in any way, so when your stupid husband ends up dead or captured, and I hope it’s soon, you will be able to live out your life in a decent manner.” Narcissa nodded her head formally, but Harry noticed she had a pleased glint in her eye. Harry made a mental note to tell Sirius that Lucius was indeed in Azkaban.

“Draco” Sirius looked the young Malfoy in the eyes. “I don’t like you. You are petty, prideful, prejudiced, bullying, nasty, cowardly... everything I don’t like in a kid. I can’t even call you a man. The only reason I’m leaving you anything is because you are Narcissa’s kid, and because I want no chance you can contest this later. I’m leaving you 2 thousand galleons – enjoy. It could have been much, much more if you weren’t such a weasel.” Draco gulped and nodded, and made a faint attempt at looking like he didn’t care, but Harry could see he was shaken. Harry also glanced over at Ron, and was disgusted to see raw jealousy and greed oozing out of the red head’s face. Harry saw Fred nudge George and point at Ron subtly, and the twins both looked with disapproval at their brother’s reaction.

Sharpclaw cleared his throat for attention. “At this time, the reading is over for the Malfoys. Please leave the room, where you will be escorted to the lobby by my assistant waiting for you outside.” He bowed to the flaxen-haired couple as they exited.

“Now” smiled Sirius looking around the room, “the rest of us are friends and we can talk openly. Arthur, Molly – you have rough times ahead of you. Before we get to the fun stuff – like money – I need to give you a heads up. For a long time now I’ve had my doubts about Dumbledore.” (Harry noted every head in the room snap up at this except Remus and the twins). “I don’t doubt he is against Voldemort, but I do question his methods. He has kept Harry and the rest of us in the dark far more than necessary, and caused a lot of grief with his decisions. I don’t think the Burrow is safe – I haven’t for a while. You need to leave, and leave soon. The sooner the better. I’d offer you a Black property, but it would probably be too obvious and Bella might have ways to find them. I want to personally thank you for being like parents to Harry when I couldn’t be myself. You will always have my gratitude.” (Harry saw sincere tears on Molly’s cheeks and a pleased expression on Arthur’s face). So I’m leaving you two 2 million galleons – that should help in relocation”.

The Weasleys gasped in disbelief. “That is too much, Sirius” gasped Molly weakly, but Sirius merely smiled broadly and said “Too bad – it’s already been done”. The twins clapped with joy for their parents, and Ron looked surprised and pleased. Hermione, Tonks, and Remus were all laughing at the Weasley’s obvious shock and delight.

Sirius turned to Tonks now “Nymph sweetie! I can finally call you that without getting a black eye” Sirius smirked at her with mirth. Tonks growled playfully and made a fist at him – she really hated her real first name. “2 mil for my favorite niece – maybe there’s a certain wolf you could settle down with? And speaking of wolves” Sirius turned to face Remus, “Remus my friend. You really have had a short stick from life. You have been a fantastic friend and fighter for the good. Finding work and places to live with your ‘furry little problem’ has been impossible, so 1 mil for you, and Grimmauld Place. Now you don’t have to worry about that. Settle down and raise a litter of pups. And please keep an eye on our cub, ok?” Remus nodded, eyes shiny with tears.

“Fred and George!” Sirius turned toward the twins, and thumbed his nose at them. “You guys are the best. Love the joke shop – wish I could have spent more time in it. You are making your own fortune, so money doesn’t mean a lot for you, but you aren’t leaving empty

handed. To my pal Fred, I leave a note book full of pranks and ideas for future projects I had made in school, a case of Slothmore's 25 yr Firewhiskey, and a cottage in Hogsmeade. George, to you I leave the notes on how we created the Marauder's Map, a keg of Mavinder's best Meade, and a cottage near Diagon Alley. To the both of you, I leave Zonko's joke shop. Yes," he smiled at their disbelief, "I bought it a year ago – I never got around to actually handing it over to you."

Fred and George jumped up from their seats, danced a jig arm in arm, marched up and kissed Sirius' portrait. Everyone had a great laugh that helped to ease some of the tension.

Sirius turned to Ron with a smile "well, Ron! I understand you've had a rough time. It's tough when your best friend has all the money, all the attention, all the fame." Harry wasn't happy to see the expression on Ron's face. It wasn't warm and fuzzy at all. "To help you become your own man, I'm leaving you with 5 thou of your own. Don't leave Harry – I know he can be moody, but he has been through hell, and he needs his friends. Remember – you have the one thing he can never have, and would give everything for – a loving family."

Ron nodded at Sirius, but didn't look any where near as ecstatic as he should of. It was a rough week for Harry – first learning about Dumbledore's questionable motives, and now he was more than a little uneasy about his 'best friend'.

"Hermione, my love!" chortled Sirius. "You are the smartest witch of your age. Without your brains and support Harry couldn't have survived the past five years. You two are a terrific team. I leave you 5 thou also, and the Black library which is at Grimmauld Place. Don't worry, I removed and destroyed any booby-trapped books. Yes, some of the books are very dark magic, but how can you beat the opposition if you can't understand it first?" Hermione was crying again, and spoke out her thanks to Sirius.

Sharpclaw once again cleared this throat. "That is all there is. We will deliver the portrait once Mr. Potter has had his reading. Please exit the room where you will find my assistant to help you to the lobby after signing paperwork." He gestured them politely out of the room. Ron held back, looked at the painting, and muttered "you probably left

a fortune to Harry, didn't you?" Hermione looked appalled, but Ron just glared at her and left the room.

When the door shut, Harry pushed gently to the front of his room to gaze out the window as close to Sirius' portrait as he could get. Sirius turned, looked Harry in the eye and laughed "hey cub – how's it going?"

"You can see me – you knew I was here?" gasped Harry.

Sirius laughed. "Sure – knew it before I was brought in. I just had to ask about you to make it convincing" Sirius chuckled. "By the way, nice hat. So, you going to stay over there, or come over and say hi?"

Harry spun around, stuttering "how – where?" One of the kindly witches gently pushed him toward one of the oak doors and smiled. "Just go through there – it will take you to the next closest painting, which in this case is your friend." Harry snatched the hat and wig off his head, gratefully handed to the beaming witch, grabbed the doorknob and jumped through without a second thought.

And there he was, in Sirius' portrait with him, magically in the same scale. Sirius grabbed him in a strong hug, and Harry bawled unashamedly, taking in the wonderful moment. After an eternity, or was it a moment, Sirius stood back a couple of steps, took Harry's hands and smiled down at him.

"Harry, I'm so sorry this isn't the real me. Don't be fooled by the realism – the real me is gone. My painting here is to help you and advise you, but don't ever forget that, or dwell in the past – this isn't the real Sirius Black."

But the expression on the portrait version of Sirius was so sincere – the wide grin, dark eyes almost spilling over with tears, and warm hands. It even smelled like Sirius, which made the deception even crueler. Harry looked at the ground, tears still falling slowly, and refused to look him in the eye.

"What is it, my cub?" Sirius tilted Harry's face to meet his by the chin. "What's on your mind?"

“Well, this is all my fault, Sirius. You know it is. You’d still be alive if it wasn’t for me. How can you be happy to see me? Would the real you be this pleased?” Harry sobbed with guilt and grief.

Sirius smiled at him and put an arm around his shoulder. “Harry, I commissioned this painting with Remus’ help while I was prisoner at Grimmauld Place. I updated the portrait daily with anything I could think of that could help you in case of my death, and the last update was the day before I snuffed it. I concentrated on you with this – I figured my days were numbered for a variety of reasons, and I knew you’d need some help getting over it. You are not to blame – Bella killed me, with Dumbledore’s help and blessing. I knew I was heading into a trap, and I wanted to be there for you. You do know that Dumbledore put Bella under the imperious, don’t you? Really, it was him that murdered me.”

Harry gaped at Sirius. He moved his mouth a few times, but wasn’t able to make any noise.

“Now I can be perfectly honest with you. Dumbledore has been pulling strings and working events behind the scenes for decades now. He wants to be the hero to defeat Voldemort, and will stop at nothing. I have no doubt he has his eye on the Ministry of Magic, but doesn’t want the job until he can be voted in as *the* hero of the war. His only interest in you is how you can better his position and make him look good. Do not trust him, do not confide in him, but do not confront him. Remus, Tonks, Fred and George know, and you can trust them. I think Molly and Arthur are cool, but I’m not sure. Hermione is straight, but Harry, be careful with Ron and Ginny. I don’t trust those two – I think Dumbledore’s got them in his pocket.”

Harry listened intently, nodding in agreement. “Griphook the goblin has been speaking with me – I just learned some of what Dumbledore has been doing to me all these years. I’m furious, but I’ve got to be cautious, I know. Griphook is going to teach me goblin magic!” He smiled excitedly.

“Excellent!” Sirius nodded. “And don’t forget the house elves. They are very powerful and underestimated, Harry, and they already love

you. Learn all you can of the kinds of magic both Voldemort and Dumbledore don't know. That is the 'power he knows not'."

"Humph" snorted Harry. "Dumbledore told me it was love."

"What?" yelled Sirius. "Whattaya going to do – walk up and KISS Voldemort?"

Harry and Sirius shared a good laugh at the mental picture as Sharpclaw walked back into the office. "Have you two had a nice visit? We do need to finish the reading of the will, if you are ready."

With a glance at Sirius, Harry nodded and waited for Sharpclaw to speak. The goblin picked up the will and read "I Sirius Black, leave everything else to Harry Potter, in the sincere hope that he will use some of it to treat himself to a good remainder of his childhood, and find some safety from his relatives and Dumbledore." Sharpclaw looked at Harry and said "you have the contents of the two Black vaults. In addition, I name Harry Potter my heir and heir to the Black family name."

Sirius grinned at Harry, who looked embarrassed. "There's a good bit of cash in one of the vaults, and lots of cool treasure in the other. Yes, Ron is right – I've left you a good fortune. I would have left Ron less than Malfoy if it wouldn't have raised people's suspicion."

Harry gave a deep sigh and looked at Sirius, treasuring the feel of the adult's arm around his shoulder. "It hurt to loose you Sirius – it always will. I'll move on, but there will always be a bit of a hole where you were. And losing Ron was losing some childhood innocence, if that makes sense. He was my first friend, and best mate for five years. I don't know if I'll ever get over that too."

His godfather looked down at him and smiled sadly. "Most childhoods are rough, and yours has been hell, Harry. The tragedy of your life is the fame your destiny thrust on you. Because of that fame, you attract good and bad. Dumbledore is powerful, but he's also old, and has gotten lazy. He is so use to manipulating people; he doesn't do it with the same finesse as in the past. His use of you, Ron and Ginny have been heavy handed and clumsy. You will get over it. Lean on Hermione and the twins – they are true friends."

Sharpclaw spoke up again. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need this room, and it's not a good idea to be out of your body for too long a time. If you will say your good byes to Mr. Black, leave out that door into the first painting, and out the red door, we will have this portrait of Mr. Black reduced in size and sent to your address at Privet Drive. When you wake Griphook will help you with the paper work concerning Mr. Black's estate."

Harry smiled up at Sirius and gave him a large hug, returned in full. "See you soon Sirius – thanks for having this painting done. I don't care about the money and stuff – this portrait of you will give me what I always wanted – you in my life to guide me."

Sirius tussled Harry's hair affectionately. "You are a good person, Harry, and I love you. I'll see you as soon as I'm delivered to your house."

With that, Harry broke away, exited the painting, and waved good bye to the witches and wizards in the next room. Smiling, he opened the red door and stepped into blackness. Opening his eyes, Harry was looking up at his ceiling once again, turned to see Griphook looking at him with composure, and sat up on his bed.

"Well, I'm back" Harry sighed. "It was a shock to see Sirius again, but boy I needed to talk to him! I can't wait to get him here. And Griphook, Ron is not my friend either. I'm really learning a lot since your visit last week. It really hurts – he was my best mate for five years, and now I see I never really knew him."

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Is he the one you gave you that sneakoscope?" Griphook asked, pointing a long finger at the glass object on Harry's nightstand. Harry nodded and with a wave of his hand, Harry watched a blue glow surround the sneakoscope, with an iridescent bubble containing the glow and object.

"What are those, Griphook?" Harry asked, drawing closer.

"Well", replied the goblin, "the blue aura is goblin magic to reveal spells, charms, hexes, etc. By the color of the glow, I can tell you somebody charmed this sneakoscope to reinforce feelings of loyalty or love you have for the person who presented it to you. The outer

'shell', for lack of a better word, is a shield I contained it with when I arrived last week, before waking you. I scanned the room for magic, and besides your wand, cloak, inks, spell-checking quills and other school supplies, this was the only item that turned up positive. I came to the conclusion it was Mr. Weasley because in the week you have been away from its influence, you have come to realize his friendship is something to be questioned."

Harry snorted. "At least I don't have to feel stupid for not seeing through him sooner – I was getting constant magical encouragement to like him. I think the hardest part of seeing Ron and Dumbledore again will be hiding my true feelings."

"That" said Griphook solemnly, "is going to be part of your training. Here, Mr. Potter is a list of all the assets from the Black estate if you wish to look it over. I have a stack of parchments for you to sign and a couple more items."

Harry took the parchment Griphook gave him and glanced over it with small interest, started to put it down and then grabbed it again. "EIGHTEEN MILLION?" he yelled – "How? Why? That's too much!"

His companion smiled his toothy smile at him. "Mr. Potter, the Black estate was at one time quite extensive, as you must have gathered from what he gave to everyone at the reading. The Black family is very ancient. If it had not been for the wars, your godfather's imprisonment, and how the family was split into sides, the wealth would have been substantially more."

Harry signed the paperwork with numbness. "What now?" he asked weakly.

"Here is the Black signet ring – wear it at all times." Griphook handed him a handsome gold ring. "It has been charmed to add some magical protection against many hexes and charms, and it gives you access to the Black vaults. And here," Griphook handed him another gold ring, "is the Potter signet ring. You wear it on your other hand. I took the liberty of charming it to give you the goblin magic of seeing auras without casting the spell. To use it, simply rub the top with your finger twice – the effect will stop after a few minutes so you don't

drive yourself to distraction seeing auras everywhere. Your name is now Lord Harry James Potter-Black.”

Harry gazed at the rings on his two fingers. Both were handsome gold, plain except for intricately engraved family crests on the top. “How come I’ve never noticed rings like them on other people’s hands? Shouldn’t Dumbledore, Mr. Weasley, or other people wear their own? What about Malfoy?”

“Hrumph” snorted Griphook. “Mr. Malfoy will have his ring when he comes of age. You get yours now because you are the only surviving member of each house. As to why you don’t see them, most people charm them invisible – it’s in rather bad taste to flaunt your lineage in certain circumstances, and could be an invitation to a mugging in others.”

“Oh!” Harry said. “Um, could you do that for me, since I can’t do magic here?” Griphook waved his fingers over Harry’s hands, and the rings slowly faded from sight. He could feel them on his fingers, and had some fun rubbing the Potter ring and looking around at the auras in his room, but soon turned his attention back to Griphook.

“One last thing” Griphook said when he had finished with the invisibility charm, “here is a gift from me.” He handed Harry a book. “If you are still interested in lessons with me after reading it, speak into the picture on the bookplate and I will get the message and contact you. Do not send owls, as they are not private. And do read the book – there will be a quiz”. The goblin ended with a friendly yet threatening smile that Harry decided meant Griphook wanted to continue with him, but wanted to be taken seriously.

Harry looked at the book – the title was “Goblins through Goblin Eyes”. He nodded appreciatively at it. “Thanks Griphook – I’ll be calling when I’m done with it. I’m really looking forward to learning about a world I’ve ignored before now. And thanks for everything – I really mean that.”

Griphook nodded, gave Harry a short bow, and apparated from the house.

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## Chapter 4

### Of Wizards and Goblins

Harry spent the rest of Thursday remembering Sirius. He went downstairs and did chores around the house to keep his hands busy, and indulged in a day of nothing more taxing than recalling the all too brief time he spent with his godfather and listing the things he missed about him the most. It was far from depressing – it was a time of healing and moving on. Harry looked forward to the painting arriving, and frequently found himself glancing through the windows for owls, though he seriously doubted the goblins would send him anything in that manner now.

Friday broke dark and wet, with the rain beating against his windows in hypnotic pounding. Harry smiled and traced a stream of water down the cold glass with a fingertip. It was a perfect day for reading and studying. He beat everyone to the shower, dressed quickly, and made coffee for the house. Harry didn't like the Dursleys, but with everything else going on, he vowed to try and get along with them to the best of his ability. He made breakfast and set out a pleasant enough looking table, so by the time his Aunt and Uncle stumbled downstairs, they were surprised to be greeted by the welcome smells of food to see them on their way to work. Harry didn't say a thing, but served them with a polite smile, handed the paper to his Uncle as he walked out the door with a grunt, and was amused to see them both shooting strange looks at him.

Harry washed up, dusted downstairs, and indulged himself with scanning the area for auras. Sure enough, in the parlor in a rather central location to the house, was a china vase that Harry never really paid attention to except to dust once a week, that emitted a huge blood red aura. *"That can't be good"* he thought to himself. *"If blue is loyalty, I'll bet anything that red is hatred. I can't wait to ask Griphook about this."*

He headed up stairs, passing Dudley in the hall. "Dudley, I left your breakfast on the table – it's still warm. Just leave the plate next to the sink." His large cousin gaped at him, but headed down, while Harry shut himself into his room, and curled up on his bed with the book

from Griphook. He rubbed the Potter ring and glanced around the room, frowning at the blue sneakoscope contained within it's barrier, and noticed that many of his school books (the goblin book in his hands included) glowed a gentle green, and his wand laying on his night stand had a strong golden aura.

Harry spent the next few days absorbing the book. Although he wasn't as fast a reader as Hermione, this really grabbed his interest. 'Goblins Through Goblin Eyes' seemed to be written for people like himself – non-goblins who were sincerely interested in the culture. It covered history, life style, politics and magic.

Goblins were certainly a war-like race, and highly intelligent. They had methodical brains that thrived on strategy, statistics, math, and logic. Art was mostly foreign – tapestry weavings and armor forging, which was surprisingly (to Harry) done by the women. Music tended to be very rhythmic – the sort of stuff you would march to war with. For centuries they held their own against the giants and other fearsome species in the world, until man entered the world. The humans bred like rabbits in comparison to the goblins, but also brought a calming influence to the world with their poetic, philosophical way of looking at things.

As humans started to take over the earth, by sheer numbers alone, the goblins were faced with the choice to fight or blend in. They chose to use their natural abilities to blend in, and quickly took up the role of bankers and accountants for the wizarding world. Muggles could not accept them – felt they looked too demonic, and wizards are notoriously bad with math and needed them.

Goblins never gave up their war skills, however. They live in deep caverns underground rarely visited by other species. They haven't fought in years, but keep their own army and release pent-up aggression through hunts and aggressive business transactions. Vegetables are not in goblin diets, except for a few roots and tubers used to thicken stews and soups. Every goblin male is a warrior first, and he never forgets it.

That was not to say they were a violent society. It seemed that crime was non-existent – disagreements were usually handled through

mediators, and if that failed, formal duels to the death. They had no interest in taking over the world, or expanding their territory, as they lived underground and could have all the tunnels they wanted without conflict. They are largely amused by other species, considering them woefully vulnerable in battle, but having their uses.

Married goblin women never worked outside the home. Goblins married for life, and if a man died, his place of business would pay his wages for the rest of the widow's life. They respected their wives deeply, cherished their children, and put high value on neat homes and well-cooked meals, so the women seemed to be content to stay at home. Very few outside of the goblins have ever seen a goblin female.

Harry re-read the chapter on goblin magic three times to get it straight in his head, and then spent an afternoon pondering it. Magic is magic in the world – there is no difference in the fundamental power that goblins and wizards harnessed and named magic. But the individual ways of gathering it, focusing it, and applying it was a different as day and night. The Wizard law that forbids elves and goblins to use wands is a subject of many jokes – a goblin had no need of a wand and looks at them with a same pity a walking person might gaze at a wheelchair for an invalid.

Much of goblin magic is divided into offense/defense (war skills), protection (aura scanning, spying, preventative, and household (healing, cleaning, and cooking). Where the wizards might have a couple charms to reveal magical items, hidden doors, or determine if magic had been used on an item or place, the goblins had several score for the same purpose. Harry could easily see why Gringotts was such a safe place – no magical creature was going to penetrate those walls without leaving traces that could be read by the various spells.

Occlumency and Legilimency were a world apart too. Where wizards could rarely perform these abilities, as it was a wandless magic, the majority of wizards that could were as subtle and unobtrusive as Snape had been – like using a wrecking ball to knock on somebody's door. Dumbledore was one of the few exceptions in this. It also required eye contact for the duration of the probe, which limited the

use if you were trying to read somebody's mind without their knowing. The goblins were able to easily enter a mind undetected – gentle and soothing, get what they needed and politely exit. They had strong moral beliefs about not staying in an unaware mind and spying out innermost thoughts – they would get the information they needed and leave.

The final chapters in the book dealt with communicating with goblins. Polite greetings, faux faux to avoid, formal greetings, table manners, how to conduct business, etc. It was a wealth of information. Harry was surprised to learn that goblins will never refer to other species by first name, unless they have been formally adopted into a goblin tribe. To turn your back on a goblin was considered a huge insult which they have tolerated because of wizard ignorance.

Harry studied the polite greetings and worked hard on trying to learn some key phrases in the goblin language. The book had a charm, that when certain phrases were tapped with a finger the book would say them out loud, and critique your attempt. It was almost as annoying as the talking mirrors at The Leaky Caldron, but really helped.

By the end of the week Harry felt he was ready for goblin training, or at least he hoped. He opened to the bookplate, like Griphook had instructed him, and studied the picture of the author Gnash. Gnash, with a semi-menacing snarl which Harry now understood to mean “I’m giving you a chance to prove yourself, speak your mind”, was drumming his fingers on his desk and staring into Harry’s eyes.

“Er...” Harry stuttered nervously, “I need to tell Griphook I’m ready”. Gnash’s eyebrows lowered and a low growl was distinctly heard.

“Oh!” Harry’s face lit up with understanding. “Um, Dor risbisk al ack Griphook mak dubar” and he bowed to the bookplate image.

“Trae” said Gnash with a return bow. “You almost made me think I wasted my time writing this book, sir!” And Gnash walked out of his picture after shooting Harry a polite closed-mouth smile.

Harry sat back in his chair, idly watching the book for Gnash’s return. He propped the book up on his desk, pulled out parchment and ink,

and wrote his quick “I’m fine” letter to the order, and a note for Hermione.

*Dear Hermione,*

*You would be proud of all the studying I’m doing. I’m actually enjoying it! The muggles are leaving me alone and I’m taking advantage of the lack of distraction. I wish I could take a trip to Flourish & Blotts though – I can think of several subjects I’d like to do some research on.*

*Are you with the Weasley’s yet? How are you feeling after the attack at the Ministry? I still feel guilty for getting everyone involved with that. I wish I had listened to you – you had the sense to see it was a trap. If I had listened, you and Ron wouldn’t have been hurt, and Sirius would still be alive.*

*Tell me what you have been doing this summer, and what books are you reading?*

*Harry*

Without a sound Hedwig glided down from her perch on the wardrobe and held out her leg. Harry smiled and stroked her back and scritchd her on the neck, loosening the quill casings on the new feathers she couldn’t reach. The owl closed her eyes with pleasure and Harry told her “ok girl – please deliver the order letter first to anyone you want, and then Hermione’s letter. Thanks.” Hedwig hopped on the window sill, gave a quiet ‘hoot’ and flew off.

A moment later Gnash walked back into his picture, nodded once at Harry, and ceased to move. Harry shut the book with a small sigh, had enough time to stand up from his desk, when Griphook apparated into his room. With a small formal bow, Griphook wove his charms around the room for silence.

Harry took a deep breath, and kneeled to the floor. He pulled his hair off his neck in the goblin bow of total submission, which exposed the neck for a clean beheading if the recipient of the formal request should choose to refuse, and choose instead to kill the petitioner. “Urush-Gai. Komeni gai Griphook. Ursoo-Tow Harry James Potter.”

Which roughly translated to “As the first teacher I wish you, Griphook to be to me, and I will be as the first student.”

He waited in anticipation. Griphook now had 3 choices – to kill him, accept him as student, or sever all communications with him and leave. As Griphook had already offered to teach him, he wasn't too worried, but all answers in formal goblin required Griphook to draw his knife. That was never a thing to be too relaxed around.

Harry heard the sound of a long knife being withdrawn from its sheath. After what seemed an eternity of waiting, he saw it placed on the floor in front of him and was relieved to hear Griphook say “Ursoo-Tow, Mr. Potter. Urush-Gai keydest foo.”

Harry respectfully picked up the blade with both hands and held it up to Griphook, looking him fully in the eyes. To blink or look away would have been improper. With a closed-mouth smile and pleased expression Griphook took his knife back, placed it in its sheath, and raised Harry up by the shoulders.

“I am flattered, Mr. Potter” the goblin spoke. “You truly are serious. We have much to learn, and your time to learn is limited. I'm going to cast a few spells – the first will contain this room in case you accidentally use wizard magic so you don't get in trouble with the ministry. And this one,” Griphook did some very intricate hand and finger movements around the room, and Harry could feel magic swirling “will slow down time while we are in this room. This way we will be able to fit several years of intense training into a couple weeks and not age in our bodies.”

“Griphook, you are cool” Harry grinned. Griphook smiled sincerely at the boy, conjured a book which he handed to him, and then a large table and 2 chairs. “First thing we will learn” the goblin said, “is how to create auras without your ring, how to read them, and how to contain them like I did with your sneakoscope”.

The strange couple worked for hours, with Harry losing all track of time. After about three hours Harry was able to cast his own aura charm with pure goblin magic. They took a break for lunch, which Griphook conjured for them. Griphook was gnawing on a rather large

rib, using his many sharp teeth to full advantage, and Harry was immensely enjoying a BLT.

"You are doing extremely well, Mr. Potter. I am impressed." Griphook spoke after clearing up the remains of their meal. "Thanks, Griphook" Harry replied, "how much time has passed outside this room?". "About three minutes" the goblin replied. "Super!" Harry's excitement was contagious. "At this rate the summer will be so productive! But boy, am I going to be disoriented when I leave this room!"

"Yes, Mr. Potter" Griphook smiled at him "that will be your biggest challenge. You do not want to tell your friends unless you are completely sure of them what we are doing, but it will be hard not to reflect the changes going on in your life. We will be learning goblin occlumency, which will protect your thoughts from Mr. Dumbledore and Mr. Riddle, but those lessons are for later."

By the end of a good 14 hours in the room's time (which was less than 10 min in the rest of the world), Harry had mastered auras, had a good grasp of what the colors meant, and was able to contain them completely. Griphook smiled at Harry, gave a formal bow, and said "well, Mr. Potter, until tomorrow. Try looking for auras around your home, and let me know if you find anything. And before I forget," Griphook reached into his satchel, "here is the portrait of your godfather. How large would you like me to make it?"

Harry grasped the sides of the frame, which was presently as large as a sheet of notebook paper. Sirius winked cheekily at him and blew him a kiss. With a giggle Harry said "could you make it about, oh so big?" while holding his hands at about 15 x 20 inches. Griphook nodded and with more finger motions he enlarged Sirius' portrait and handed it to him. "Have a pleasant day, Mr. Potter." He apparated away without a sound.

"Sirius!" Harry hardly remembered to breathe. He placed the painting reverently on his desk, facing his bed. "How are you?"

"Hey cub!" Sirius looked at his godson with warmth. "I'm fine – glad to be with you. Is this your room?" The figure in the painting looked around with distaste and astonishment. "Boy, the Dursleys really do treat you like dirt!"

“Oh hey – this is a huge improvement over the cupboard” Harry snorted, and Sirius gave an exceptionally black look at the door toward where he imagined the Dursleys were. “No matter. Let me tell you what’s been going on”.

Harry spent the next hour until lunch catching Sirius up on what had been happening. Sirius was very interested in the sneakoscope being charmed for loyalty towards Ron, and they agreed on needing to watch him closely. Harry decided to take a lunch break. Since the Dursleys were outside at the moment, Harry contained the red aura around the vase in the parlor. “Let’s see if there is any change in attitudes toward me in this house” Harry thought to himself. He then prepared a nice lunch for everyone, ate quickly before his Aunt and Uncle came inside, and went out to do the lawn work.

The next two weeks fell into a pleasant routine. Harry made himself a schedule so he would remember to write the order every three days and do chores to keep his relatives happy. The time spent with Griphook stretched to close to three years, and Harry and the goblin became very close. He was now able to heal, apparate soundlessly, change his appearance, speak goblin, and shield his thoughts, replacing them with false thoughts of his choosing. Harry was now also very well versed in long knife fighting as a bonus, and able to do what the goblins classed as simple conjuring, all the while with Sirius cheering them on.

At their final meeting for learning Harry sat across from Griphook with sadness in his eyes. “Why so down, Mr. Potter?” the goblin asked kindly.

“I’ll miss our lessons, Griphook. I’ll miss you!” Harry took the goblin’s hand and grasped it sincerely.

Griphook smiled lovingly at the boy he had mentored for years of alternate time. “This isn’t goodbye, my young student. As was with the first teacher and first student, so are we. Goblin relationships are not so fickle and fleeting. Now, if you think back to our first meeting here, I mentioned to you that the goblins have their own prophecy regarding you. I think the time has come for you to hear it.”

The goblin took a clear sphere out of his ever-present leather satchel and waved his long fingers around it. A voice could be heard, speaking clearly:

*One who comes is evil incarnate. He seeks to destroy all that is not wizard pure. He marks the child Whose parents thrice defied him - The child born when summer's moon is waning.*

*The child will grow alone, unknown Betrayed by one the wizards love. When he comes into his own And learns of his betrayal, He will start his true path of learning.*

*The child yet not-a-child will learn The king of his time is corrupt. The king will work against him, And then will rise against him But will not win.*

*The boy will learn the ways of the goblins, The ways of the elves, And the ways of the wizards. He will have power the Dark Lord knows not.*

*The young man will find Three close friends. They cannot be parted. They were together at the founding of the school.*

*The young man will find Four not-of-the wizards. They will unite the magical worlds once more. They will defeat evil, betrayer and king And peace will rule at last.*

"Wow" Harry spoke. "That is a lot different from Dumbledore's prophecy. Do you have any idea what he really said?" He looked at Griphook hopefully.

"No" Griphook spoke seriously. "But we goblins have a saying. If an honest man tells you something, research the facts before acting. If a liar tells you something, walk away and ignore it."

"I take it" Harry spoke hesitantly, "that you feel I'm the child/man of your prophecy?" Griphook nodded. "Then dealing with Voldemort is just a one part of my job. I need to deal with Dumbledore and Fudge, and put somebody good in power that will stop treating goblins and house elves and centaurs like second-class citizens. Whew!"

Griphook nodded at Harry and smiled. "Keep this container so you can hear it when you wish" and he handed Harry the sphere, "and just tap it when you want to hear it. Now it's time to take my leave, my dear Mr. Potter. Although formal lessons are finished, please keep me informed and up to date on how you are doing. I will miss our time together too, but you are in my heart and thoughts."

With a formal bow, Griphook apparated out of the room, leaving Harry alone with the small glass globe in his hand, and Sirius smiling at him from the wall.

## Chapter 5

### Shopping Spree

Harry spent a couple days getting use to the real world again. He missed Griphook deeply – the goblin was like a father to him now. He missed his dry humor and endless patience, and the new world he had opened up to Harry. Not wanting to waste any precious time before Hogwarts started again, and the time when he would have to see Dumbledore face to face, Harry worked hard on his homework and on house chores to minimize tension with the Dursleys.

Ever since encapsulating the parlor vase to keep the hate spell enclosed, Harry had noticed a slow change in his relatives. Dudley wasn't pushing or tripping him as much, and his Aunt and Uncle hadn't yelled in two weeks. Although they were far from friendly, they were not openly hostile anymore. It was an improvement.

Harry woke on a Friday, early July, to the sound of Hedwig tapping on his window. He sleepily let her in; giving her a bit a sausage he had saved from the night before, and untied the letter on her leg. He smiled to see it was from Hermione.

*Dear Harry,*

*Well, welcome to the bookish side of life! I wish we could meet at F & B – but everything is too dangerous now. I can't wait for Hogwarts and access to the library again.*

*No, I'm still at home with my parents. I have no idea when we will meet or where, but it couldn't be written in a letter anyway, if you know what I mean. And DON'T blame yourself for what happened at the ministry! I'm all better now, I'm sure Ron is, and it's NOT YOUR FAULT! Bella killed Sirius, not you. Voldemort killed Sirius. Not you.*

*I'm re-reading many of my 5th year books now. I'm particularly enjoying History of Magic when I can drink coffee while reading it and don't have a dead teacher droning at me. Hee hee. Do you remember the war of 1218? It's very interesting – check it out.*

*Hermione*

Harry read the letter out loud to Sirius, who scratched his head and gave a puzzled look. "Harry," he said "I think she's trying to tell you something."

"Hmmm?" Harry was re-reading the letter, and searched through his school trunk for his History of Magic book. "War of 1218, War of 1218.... Here we go". He scanned the pages eagerly. Harry really wanted to keep Hermione as the close friend that he thought she was, but his trust was pretty shaken in human nature at the moment. "Check this out, Sirius" he spoke gleefully, pointing at a passage in the well-worn textbook and reading out loud "The Goblin Rebellion of 1218 doesn't stand out much from the others of the time period, with the exception that the goblin general, Dumalt, was a double agent, paid off by the wizards to give information. It turned out he wasn't pro-wizard or pro-goblin, but merely acting in what he felt was in his own best interests, hoping for money, fame and power." Harry looked up and gave Sirius a meaningful look "Hmmm – sound like someone we know?"

The portrait snorted. "Yep – I think she's on to Dumbledore too."

"Well" said Harry casting repelling charms around his door, "I'm going to find out I think. I'm going to leave for a couple days. These charms will keep my relatives from knocking on my door or thinking about me." He cast some charms on himself to change his looks – now Harry had curly brown hair (which hid his scar nicely) and brown eyes and changed his glasses. He glanced in the mirror with a smile "Meet Edward Evans, Sirius!"

His godfather smiled. "Gotta love that goblin magic" he grinned. "Where are you going?"

"First I'm going to visit Griphook and get some money. Then I'm going to do some shopping in Diagon Alley and maybe spend the night there, I'm not sure. I'm going to visit Hermione and see if I can tell if she's Dumbledore's or my friend. And I'm going to do some shopping for some decent muggle clothes!" Harry smiled widely. This was going to be fun.

"Be careful, cub" spoke Sirius seriously. "Stay concealed and stay safe."

“I will, Sirius. I promise you will see me tomorrow, probably late.” With that, Harry silently apparated out of the room and appeared in front of Gringotts Bank. “Hello, Griphook” he muttered quietly to himself.

Harry walked up to the front desk of the bank. “Could I speak to Griphook, please?” The goblin looked at him curiously, and answered in a low, discrete voice “certainly, Lord Potter-Black.”

Harry looked at him and grinned nervously, in what he hoped was the proper goblin facial response, “How did you know it was me?”

The goblin gave a bow and continued in the same quiet tone “you are using goblin magic, sir. And very well, I might add. If you were a goblin I would not be able to see through your disguise, but wizard use of goblin magic leaves a different effect in goblin perceptions. Also, the lights on this counter are charmed to reveal family rings. Please follow me”.

Harry entered the office he was led to, and thanked his escort. “Griphook!” he called with a smile and formal bow. “Urush-Gai” he said affectionately, and grasped his hand.

Griphook returned the warm smile and bowed and said. “I have missed you, Mr. Potter” he said, “and I’m glad you are here. What is the purpose for this visit?” and he waved him to a chair and conjured tea and biscuits.

Harry took a cup, sipped the hot brew, and gazed at Griphook. “Well, first of all, I miss you. I feel like part of me is missing now. You are the closest thing I’ve ever had for a father, and the best. Our two weeks/three years have meant a lot to me, and I was going to write a letter, but I decided to put into practice what you have been teaching me and visit.”

Griphook studied Harry, pleased and touched. “Ursoo-Tow”, he spoke softly, “and you like a son to me. I am glad. Your disguise is very well done – I am proud. Although it has been only a short while, I have missed our time of closeness also. My office is always open to you”.

Harry pulled Hermione’s letter and his History of Magic book from a satchel and handed them over to his teacher. “I need your opinion.

Do you think she's warning me, or trying to trick me into revealing something for Dumbledore?"

The goblin read the letter and scanned the reference in the book, smiling broadly. "This witch is a clever one. My associates said that after the reading of Mr. Black's will they got the impression she was honestly grieving and sincerely worried about you. They did not pick up any 'magical scent' of Dumbledore on her, although they did find it all over Mr. And Miss Weasley." He pushed the book and letter back to Harry. Naturally, I advise caution."

"Great – that's what I was hoping to hear" Harry nodded, pleased. "Now, I need to know if there is anyway I can access money from my account without having to come here all the time? I want to do some shopping in Diagon Alley and some muggle shopping" he gestured at his Dudley hand-me-downs with a rueful expression.

"Certainly, Mr. Potter" Griphook reached into his desk "I think this is what you are looking for. It looks like an ordinary muggle credit card, but it takes the exchanged value from your vault directly and pays the merchant, like a normal credit card. We do not charge interest for using it, but there is a small fee per transaction. As for shopping in wizard stores or catalogs, simply give an impression of your key and they can charge your account. The magical wax used for the transactions only lasts long enough for the required purchase, and disappears immediately afterwards, so it is secure."

"Wow, Griphook", Harry took the card, "you guys think of everything. Thanks!"

They continued to chat about nothing in particular, when Harry, shooting a shrewd look at his mentor, spoke. "Griphook, what is it with Hogwarts's History of Magic? Why have they taught me for five years about nothing but goblin rebellions? Most of it is fake, right?"

The goblin grimaced. "Ursoo-Tow, most of it is utterly rubbish. Check out the copyright on your text books – they are written within the last 10 years. We goblins have asked many older witches and wizards, and they say the students never speak of that class, except that it is taught by a ghost. I took the liberty of examining your books, to find

they are charmed for secrecy, my student. You are being fed lies and nonsense, and then are unable to speak of it with your elders.”

“Someone wants my generation of wizards to fear the goblins” Harry pondered, feeling sick.

“In the past 1000 years there was the occasional uprising, but it was always dealt with by coming to terms. For many centuries the wizards and goblins have relied on one another for business and profit.” Griphook rolled his eyes in a very uncharacteristic way. “There was one true war between goblin and wizard in the past 700 years – the War of 1218. Once the goblins discovered Dumalt for what he was, we took care of him, the wizards relaxed some of their strict control over Gringotts, and things went back to normal.”

The two finished a pleasant cup of tea and Harry took his leave with a heart-felt bow. “I’ll see you soon, Urush-Gai” he said and backed out the door. Griphook smiled at the door a few moments before returning to his work.

Harry stepped out into the bustling alley, enjoying the freedom of his anonymity. He was use to people staring at him and his scar, whispering and pointing, with cameras flashing. It was wonderful to be nobody. The first place he went to was a luggage store. He chose a bottomless satchel for himself and one for Hermione. They were charmed to expand to hold an enormous amount of books and belongings, keep everything featherweight, and only open for the owner. Then he treated himself to a new trunk – one with a hidden room like the one Moody owned (and was imprisoned in) during his forth year at Hogwarts. The shopkeeper shrunk the trunk with a temporary reducing spell so it would be small enough to fit in his new satchel until he removed it at home.

The next stop was Flourish & Blotts for some book buying. He picked up two of the latest versions of “Hogwarts: A History”, and spent blissful time choosing whatever he had his eyes on. He found some books on house elves, accidental magic, wandless magic, advanced dueling, potions, and defense against the dark arts. He rubbed his Potter ring and was surprised to see a tracking charm on a couple of them, and purchased them anyway.

Once outside the bookstore, Harry stopped at Florean Fortescue's for an ice cream sundae, and removed the tracking charms on his books while they were still in his satchel, so no one would notice. He pondered while sipping his sundae, on who would put the tracking charms on them – perhaps the store to do automatic mailings for advertising, but perhaps either Dumbledore or Voldemort would be interested in seeing who wanted to learn higher magic and defense.

Harry picked up owl treats for Hedwig, potion ingredients, and stationary supplies. He got himself some new robes that weren't for school, and finally stopped at the jewelry shop. There he treated himself to a pocket watch that opened on both sides of the case. One side showed the normal muggle time, and the other was a shrunk version of Mrs. Weasley's family clock. The shop owner showed him how to add hands to it, and he looked forward to adding the people he was most fond of.

He felt like he hadn't drawn attention to himself that day – he was pretty non-descript looking, and his shabby clothes didn't add any attraction. A couple store owners raised their eyebrows when he purchased high-dollar items, but in the magic world it goes without saying that things are usually not how they appear.

His last visit of the day before he planned on going to muggle London was the twin's joke shop. The neon-animated sign of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes could be seen a block away. The shop was pleasantly crowded with delighted squealing children, smirking teens, and nauseated looking parents. He noticed the twins bustling around and was pleased to see they had already added two witches to their shop staff.

Harry was bending over a display of fake mice that looked amazingly real, but would explode if a spell was cast at them, when he felt two strong arms grab him by the shoulders and snatch him out of the shop and into the back office. He spun around, wand in hand, to face the twins, Fred and George, who were standing with arms folded, smirking at him. "W-w-what do you want with me?" he stuttered, trying to change his voice.

"Come off it Harry", grinned Fred.

“Yes, nice try, Harry” leered George.

“I-I-I don’t know who you mean. My name is Edward Evans”. Harry stammered, trying to sound convincing.

“You would have had us fooled” laughed Fred

“Almost had us there” nodded George

“But why are you wearing Dudley’s old rags, Mr. Evans” they chortled in unison.

Harry grinned, relieved that his disguise had only failed because of the twin’s sharp eyes and keen memory. He put a finger to his lips, and cast charms round the room for silence and privacy, and then changed back into his normal looks.

“What’s up with the great disguise?” asked Fred.

“And how are you doing advanced magic without being thrown out of school?” questioned George.

Harry wanted to trust the twins – he always liked them and never had a reason not to have full confidence in them. Times, however, were dangerous. “Guys, would you be insulted if I asked to look into your thoughts before I answer?” Harry winced – most people would understandably be offended at this request.

“Hum,” said George. “He is a partner”

“So there are no business secrets to keep from him” finished Fred.

“And we have been wanting to speak to him” continued George.

“....about certain issues” finished Fred.

“Fine” they said in unison.

Harry gazed into their faces, one at a time, simply searching for their feelings about Dumbledore. They were honest and open, and easy to read as a book. He gasped and terminated the connection with them. “You know he can’t be trusted? How long have you known?”

“Do you mean Big D?” asked Fred seriously.

“How safe are these wards you just put up “George asked, frowning at the door and fireplace.

“Very safe – I’ve picked up some goblin magic. It can’t be tracked by either the Ministry or Dumbledore. I just learned this summer about what the ‘greatest wizard of the light’ has been doing to me. My whole life has been manipulated by the geezer, and I’m working hard to put an end to it.” Harry sat down in a chair in front of the twin’s desks and conjured some tea and sandwiches for all.

“Tell us more!” cried the twins in unison.

Harry spent the next half an hour briefly re-telling the summer’s events – the first visit from Griphook, learning about Dumbledore’s refusal to follow the wishes of his parents, stealing money from his accounts, keeping him stupid and weak. He told them about his training with Griphook, and how he had Sirius’ portrait now.

“Please guys”, Harry looked at them earnestly, try to avoid Dumbledore all you can. Do NOT look him in the eyes. He is a master Occlumens and will know you have spoken to me, what I’m doing, and that you don’t trust him.

“No problem,” George answered dryly. Fred nodded in agreement. “Ever since we left Hoggy’s, he’s barely given us the time of day”.

“Yah,” grumbled Fred, “It was all ‘Grandpa D’ when we were at school. Once we were not in a position to keep an eye on his little golden boy IckleHarrykins, he hardly knows us.”

“However, we do get around him a lot, as we are in the order” continued George. “We keep an eye on him and everyone else.”

“And an ear” winked Fred, holding up an extendable ear, one of their best inventions.

“Young Harry” George leaned forward, looking as serious as a Weasley twin can, “We have wanted to give you a heads up, but we were afraid the floos and owls are being watched.”

“Yes”-agreed Fred, “Big D is so powerful, we are never sure what he’s capable of doing.”

“Anyway” continued George, “Percy is a pratt, but Ron and Ginny, it pains me to say”...

“...especially since they are our siblings,” said Fred in a mournful voice.

“...are NOT to be trusted” they said together.

“We’ve overheard a lot” Fred said sadly “the two of them talking together and with Big D. They are both on his payroll – keep tabs on Boy-Who-Lived, pretend to be friends, make a steady income.”

Harry gazed out the office window sadly, and swallowed back tears. He didn’t want to look weak to his friends, but it hurt. He knew of their betrayal already, but it hurt badly. “Were they ever my friends?” He choked out.

The twins looked at him sadly. “We always were” said Fred.

“Yes” agreed George – “we never failed you. But Ron, you know what a jealous git he’s turned into over the years. You just never knew how big of a git. Perhaps he liked you the first year, but I think Big D got to him pretty early on. Maybe even planting him and us at 9 ¾ that very first September.”

Fred shook his head sadly. “I expected better of Ginny, after you saved her from You-Know-Who. She did have a thing for you at first, but by the time you were interested, Big D had poisoned her.”

The twins looked nauseated. George said “we know she’s been, um, *seeing* other guys all along, to put it nicely. She pretends to be interested in you, makes Big D happy, gets the attention and admiration she craves, and ...”

“....has her other needs taken care of by other guys” Fred finished unhappily.

Harry felt sick. He knew she wasn't to be trusted any more, but for a brief time he had thought Ginny was the one for him. It didn't matter what Dumbledore had done to her, he doubted he would ever consider a second chance. It wasn't that she was 'tainted', but the distrust of her loyalties would always be there. Pretending not to know of this to Ron and Ginny was going to be tough this school year.

Harry showed off his new watch and gave the twins the honor of being the first two hands on it. They were pleased and flattered. He also added a hand h for Griphook. It wasn't like a warrior/goblin needed someone to keep tabs on him, but it helped Harry feel closer to him.

The three finished their lunch and as Harry got up to leave, re-charming his disguise again, he asked them "is there any reason not to trust Hermione that you know of?"

"Only that she seems to fancy our pratt brother" said George.

"We don't think she's in Big D's pocket though" Fred nodded.

Harry removed the charms from the room, opened the door and said his good byes.

*I've just learned that we aren't allowed to answer reviews or add too many author notes on our chapters. Oh well – please, oh leaders of – please don't yank my story – I promise to keep my A/N's to a minimum!*

*I have gotten several reviews that point out my fanfic isn't much different from others. Hey – I'll be the first to admit it. In many ways, if you've read one manipulative!dumbledore, you've read them all, with a few brilliant exceptions (and I don't consider mine one of them). I wrote this for myself out of boredom (I homeschool our son, so I sit with him 8 hours a day while he's working on his books), and because I love the whole genre so much I wanted to see what I could do with it. No apologies – this is what it is. Please enjoy.*

## Chapter 6

### A True Friend

It was near six in the evening when Harry left The Leaky Cauldron and entered London. He had never bought clothes for himself with the exception of wizard robes for school, and felt rather lost. He walked a couple blocks to a nicer section of town and looked at the shops. Choosing a men's store that looked like it was geared toward his age, he entered, swiftly changed into his real looks, and glanced around for a sympathetic looking clerk.

A pretty young woman came up to him. "Can I help you?" she smiled, but Harry noticed she was eyeing his hand-me-downs rather dubiously.

He smiled pleasantly at her. Looking embarrassed, he said "Um yes, we just lost everything in a house fire, and a rather large neighbor was kind enough to give me some clothing until we could start replacing everything. I need an entire new wardrobe, and would appreciate any advice. I'm lousy at picking my own clothes." He gave her a 'helpless male' look that would melt the heart of the strongest maid.

"Yes sir!" She gushed sympathetically, and mothered him for the next two hours. Harry felt like she was playing dress-up doll with as her personal Ken, but he had to admit she had excellent taste.

He left the store with several huge shopping bags crammed with jeans, shirts, slacks, shoes, socks, and undergarments. He swiftly changed back to his 'Edward Evans' persona, and Harry found a close hotel and checked in, changed clothing and happily discarded Dudley's old rags. He left again, finding another store that was open late. One nice leather jacket later, he returned to the hotel and treated himself to lovely meal.

Returning to his hotel, Harry picked up the phone and dialed Hermione. He knew the Dursley's phones were not safe to use, but didn't think Dumbledore would bother with the Granger's. He was please when Hermione picked up the phone herself. "Hello?" he

heard her say, and was surprised to find he had been holding his breath.

“Hermione? It’s me, Harry!”

“Harry! What are you doing on the phone – will your relatives get you in trouble?”

“Listen, I’m not going to talk long. I ran into my cousin Edward Evans – he’s coming to see you tomorrow. He should be there around 9 in the morning. OK? You remember him – the curly haired bloke from Suffolk.”

“Oh, yeah!” Hermione caught on immediately, and Harry breathed with relief.

“OK – hope to see you soon! I hope Dumbledore will let me.”

“Bye Harry, thanks for calling”

“Bye”.

Harry hung up the phone, pleased with himself. If her phone was magically bugged, then he would have some explaining a non-existent cousin visiting his best friend, so he spent some time thinking up good excuses if needed.

He was knackered from a day of shopping and elation, so Harry retired to bed early. “Forgot pajamas” he muttered. “I’ll get some tomorrow.” He spent a short while emptying his mind the goblin manner, and drowsily realized he hadn’t had a vision or nightmare since his training with Griphook had started in earnest. “I’ll bet Dumbledore or Snape could have taught me something to help...” and he drifted off to a full night of blissful rest.

Harry woke up refreshed and pleased to see it was only 7 am. Happily he cut all the tags off his new clothing and placed them all in his satchel, neatly folded. He made sure the book and satchel for Hermione were in the top of everything, and went down stairs for breakfast before checking out.

Looking around the small café, Harry mused to himself how fun life could be when nobody knew you and you had a little money. He had never felt so alive, and couldn't remember a time he ever enjoyed himself more. Thanks to Griphook's training, he didn't even feel twinges from his link with Voldemort. With a small sigh of pleasure, he drank the last of his coffee, left a tip and checked out of the hotel.

Flagging down a taxi, he relaxed and enjoyed the ride to Hermione's house. He winced at the meter – yes he was rich, but he had spent his whole life being poor, and he didn't think he'd ever be able to throw away money like some celebrities. An hour later the taxi pulled in front of a nice looking home in a pleasant neighborhood. Harry paid the fare, and with a spring in his step walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

Hermione opened the door and squealed believably "Cousin Edward! Come in!" She grabbed his hand and yanked him in so hard Harry rubbed his shoulder. Once the door was shut, she looked at him quizzically and asked "Harry, is that really you?"

"Are your folks here?" he asked innocently? When Hermione shook her head, Harry cast some silencing charms, and she led him to the parlor. With a grin he changed his looks back and Hermione gasped with delight and gave him a heartfelt hug.

"Harry, we have some catching up to do. You missed the reading of Sirius' will, but I'll tell you all about it. And we need to talk about, "Hermione glanced nervously around the room, "Professor Dumbledore and others. But first, please tell me where you learned how to charm your looks like that! And aren't you afraid of getting caught by the Ministry?"

Harry laughed with enjoyment. The sun was hitting Hermione's hair, and he wondered why he had never noticed what a pretty shade of auburn it was. She wasn't the large-toothed bushy haired kid he met in first year any more – she was really pretty. He looked into her eyes while she was talking, and could see clearly her loyalty for him, and a growing distrust of Dumbledore and Ron, and discreetly backed out of her thoughts.

He gave her the quickest run down he could of his meeting with Griphook, minus the bit about being at Sirius' will reading. Hermione gasped with tears in her eyes when he told her about his parents will and how Dumbledore had betrayed him over the years. He brought out his notebook he had started on examples of Dumbledore's dealings, and she quickly added a few of her own.

"I wanted to tell you about Dumbledore so badly, but I had no way to get through to you. I had hoped you would figure out my reference to the goblin war of 1218, as I couldn't trust owls or phone." She looked down sadly. I knew he was keeping you from the reading of Sirius' will when I overheard a conversation between Professor Lupin and Tonks – did you know there is a portrait of Sirius?"

Harry smiled at her. "I was at the reading, Hermione".

"Oh!" She gasped with realization, "your cloak!"

"Nope!" Harry grinned. "More help from Griphook! I was actually one of the background wizards in that painting on the wall! And don't worry – I have Sirius' painting now, at Privet Drive this very moment".

The two of them spent a lovely time giggling about hiding in paintings and what it was like, and then discussing how revolting Ron acted at the reading.

"Um, Hermione," Harry turned beet red, "can I ask you about Ron? I know you fancied him for a long time, and, well, I was curious..."

Hermione twiddled her thumbs and looked down at them. She gazed at Harry and took a deep breath. "Please promise you will keep this to yourself, Harry. When I'm near him, I can't think of anything else, but when he's away, I really can't stand him. I don't trust him anymore – I haven't for a while, but seeing that he was your best mate, I didn't want to lose you as a friend. I don't know why I feel so strongly about him when he's near – he's not really nice or good looking or smart or brave. I'd think I was enchanted, but he's not clever enough to do that."

"No, he's not, but Dumbledore is" Harry growled. He rubbed his Potter family ring and saw the familiar blue glow of the loyalty charm

coming from a locket she was wearing. “Where did you get that locket, Hermione? That is what has been spelled – to reinforce your feelings for Ron. He gave me a sneakoscope from Egypt with the same enchantment on it.”

She removed the locket and glared at it. “What a dirtbag” she spat. “Ron gave it to me for Christmas. She watched as Harry removed the enchantment from the jewelry and handed it back.

“I’d keep wearing it at school so they don’t suspect anything. We need to play along until we are strong enough to break away. I want you to finish school, but I might not – I’ve got a lot of training ahead of me, and at least two nasty wizards to take down.” Harry sighed. “Let me tell you about the true prophecy now – not the lies that Dumbledore fed me.” He pulled out the sphere with the goblin prophecy and played it for Hermione.

“Let me write down a copy of that” she said, grabbing a notebook and pen. “Hum”, she said, chewing on the end of her pen. “You are obviously the child they are talking of, and it seems to refer to Voldemort, Dumbledore and Fudge, doesn’t it? What about the three friends? Are they talking about the four founders?”

“I’m not sure, Hermione” Harry said, leaning back on the couch. “I kind of think it refers to me and three others. I think you are one, and I have an inkling that Neville and Luna are the other two. I won’t know until I see them next.”

“Who says it has to be all humans, Harry?” Hermione asked him with serious eyes. “Perhaps it makes more sense if it’s you, Griphook, and two others – say a house-elf and Hagrid?”

“Well”, Harry leaned back, pondering, “I think that’s the other part. I think the four Wizards will be joined by goblins or whomever. For now I’m just going to keep on with my private training and keep my knowledge from Dumbledore and anyone I’m not positive about. I can’t face Voldemort yet, but I must soon, and Griphook’s help has given me a serious advantage already. I know I can trust you and Fred and George, but I need to find out about Remus and Tonks.”

He took a deep breath. “Anyway, Hermione, I really need to apologize. I’m so sorry you got hurt at the Ministry. I should have listened to you, I should have been more cautious, and I should never have put my friends in danger.”

Hermione looked at him calmly. “Harry – you’ve got to stop blaming yourself for everything. We knew it was a risk. We all went willingly. I’m all healed and there is nothing to forgive. Please try to work through your grief and move on.”

With that, Harry reached into his satchel. “Well, then, time for late birthday presents!” and he tossed her copy of ‘Hogwarts: A History’ with a grin.

Hermione squealed like he had hoped she would. She thumbed through the book, cooing over the revision number and added chapters, and Harry found himself watching her with intense joy. He mused to himself how Ron and he had always teased Hermione about her book addiction, and then relied on her hard work and research to carry them through school, and how he had never truly appreciated her for her talents and drive.

“Well, here’s something to put it in” Harry smiled and tossed her the satchel he bought for her. This gift went over just as well – the charms were hugely appreciated, and she really liked the honey colored leather.

They would have gone out to eat, but Harry felt it was too dangerous for Hermione to leave her house, even disguised. He conjured up lunch for the two of them as they chatted away.

“What are your plans now?” Hermione asked Harry as they finished the last of their meal. She looked him over critically. “This summer has been good to you, Harry. You aren’t half starved and beaten like other years.”

Harry blushed. “Well, I should leave in a few. I promised Sirius I’d be back home today, and I don’t want him to worry, even if it’s not the real him. I have an idea I really think you will like. The goblins reached out to me to give me help in defeating Voldemort, but in the long range, I think they want me to help in unifying the magical world.

I know this is up your alley. I'm going to contact Dobby and see if I can determine if he is loyal to me, or Dumbledore first. If it's me, then I'm going to learn all I can about the house-elves and what they truly need and want, and see if I can get some training in their magic. They are really good at apparating and conjuring over long distances."

Hermione's grin was from ear to ear. "Harry, that's wonderful! Maybe they will finally fight for their independence too!"

Harry blushed again, and looked down at his feet. "Don't get your hopes up for that, Hermione. Humans want freedom and independence, but I really don't think house-elves do. They really do seem to live to serve. But they should never have to put up with an evil master or be treated like slaves. They should be part of a family, not a belonging. I'm going to find out all I can about their history and their honest needs. Were they always servants? Do they have a leader or a government? How do they meet other elves and marry? We don't know anything about them, but Dobby sure has some power – you should have seen him throw Lucius Malfoy across that passage way our second year! And Malfoy didn't dare fight back."

She smiled at her friend. "I'll drop S.P.E.W., I promise. I probably wouldn't have kept on about it as long as I had, if it hadn't worked Ron up so much. You are right – they are different from us. If I can help, and I'd love to, let me know. Perhaps I need to work for the better treatment of house-elves instead of freedom as we see it."

"I think it's time for me to go" Harry said sadly. I'd like to see your folks, but the fewer people who know I can get around, the better." As a last thing before leaving, Harry made a forth hand on his new watch, to keep track of Hermione's safety.

Hermione gave him a hug, and Harry was surprised to find it didn't embarrass him for once – it actually felt good. He returned it briefly with a smile, and was gratified to see her cheeks had flushed a pretty shade of pink.

"Don't you have to change back to your Edward look?" Hermione asked him with concern.

“Nope –now that I know where you live, I can apparate directly here from now on. When do your folks work so I know when it’s clear?”

“Tuesday through Saturday, Harry. You are welcome any time to visit! I miss you. Thanks for the great gifts, too.”

Harry gave her a smile and a wave and disappeared back to Privet Drive.

## Chapter 7

### The Potter Elves

Harry woke in the morning, smiling and refreshed. He stretched, remembering the hazy wisps of a sweet dream that included a certain bushy haired witch. With his goblin occlumency he was able to keep Voldemort totally out of his head, with only the faintest tickle of awareness when the evil wizard was in the throes of an extreme emotion. He glanced over to the portrait of his godfather, who gave him a cheeky wink and turned into a shaggy black dog that wagged his tail at him. Life was good for once.

After morning chores he bounded back to his room and did the customary charms for privacy and silence. First things first, he pulled his shrunk trunk out of his satchel. Once enlarged it looked like any other school trunk, complete with a few dings and scratches. When opened, it worked like any other student trunk too, charmed to hold three times the amount of a normal muggle one. But when the trunk sensed Harry's thumbprints pushing the latches twice, the open trunk revealed nothing but a stairway down.

Descending down the stairs, Harry was pleased to see a 20 x 30 foot torch lit room. Shutting the door behind him, which would automatically shut the trunk lid, he now had a private domain, only accessible by himself and individuals of his choice, unplotable and charmed to keep all magical activity secret. Pulling out his wand, he cast a light spell, and then ran up the stairs. He waited about 10 minutes, and when he didn't receive any angry letters from the Ministry, decided it must work as advertised.

Harry charmed his room for privacy and time, and grabbed Sirius' portrait and his satchel. "Come on, godfather" he chuckled, "I need help with interior decorating."

Back down in his trunk, which Harry decided to name 'Godric's Suitcase', he propped Sirius against the wall and looked around. "This is cool, cub" Sirius nodded his approval.

Harry got to work, creating a large closet against the same wall the stairs rested against, with a large house-elf sized room above it. For

the wall on the left he charmed a window seat, which reflected the view outside of where ever the trunk was at. Privet Drive wasn't much to look at, but he could keep an eye on the order members patrolling and the weather. A bathroom and book cases were on the opposite wall of that, and the wall facing the stairs had a large centered fireplace, with kitchenette to the left. He charmed the walls to look like the stone of Hogwarts, and made himself a large four-poster bed like his at school. A desk, table, work table for potions, bookcases, comfortable leather chairs and fireplace made the room comfortable and very home-like.

"Too bad I need to sleep upstairs for now" Harry grinned. "I could stay here all summer, but I need to be accessible for now."

Harry swiftly unpacked his new clothes and hung them up. He didn't want to leave them upstairs in his bedroom where his relatives could find them. His books from the previous years of school were put away, along with the new ones he got a couple days ago. Harry finally had the luxury of displaying photos and objects that were sentimental to him.

"Sirius," Harry turned to look at him. "I'd love to hang you above the fireplace, but I can't spend as much time here as I want. That's where you will be during school. But for now, let's go topside and start the day."

Out of the trunk, Harry sat down at his desk facing Sirius.

"What's up for today, cub?" Sirius asked after changing from a dog into the dark haired man.

"You'll see" Harry smiled, "it's now time for step two in my plan for wizard-world domination. Or freedom for me, if you prefer." And turning in his chair he called out "Dobby!"

With an audible 'pop' a small, strange little creature appeared before Harry. He was small; about three foot high, with large bat like ears and tennis-ball bulging eyes. He was wearing an amazing assortment of clothes – a shrunk-to-fit maroon sweater from Ron, several pairs of socks, five hats stacked precariously on top of a tea cozy on his head, and various other cast-off articles. The most extraordinary thing about

his appearance, however, was the expression of worshipful rapture on his face as he gazed at Harry.

“Harry Potter wishes to see Dobby?” the elf gushed. “How may Dobby serve the great Harry Potter?”

Harry smiled warmly at the elf. Dobby’s eyes bugged even more with surprise as he watched him, with casual hand gestures summon a table, two chairs (one raised and scaled to Dobby’s size), and a light breakfast for two. “I’d love it if you would have breakfast with me and join me in a chat after”, Harry said.

“How, how, how is Mr. Harry Potter able to do goblin magic, sir?” Dobby squeaked excitedly. “I always knew Harry Potter was great and powerful and kind, but not that he was a master of goblin magic too!” Dobby then dissolved into a flood of tears, as was typical for his kind. “The great Harry Potter asks Dobby to dine with him, as if he was an equal! You are too kind!”

He watched the elf scramble onto his chair with less protesting than usual and a pleased look on his face. They proceeded to dig into fried eggs and tomatoes, toast, tea, and pumpkin juice. After finishing Harry banished the dirty dishes with a wave of his hand and sat back eyeing the elf kindly.

“Dobby, I need to ask you some questions, and I need honest answers. If possible, I need for you to swear to me your answers are true to the best of your ability. I only ask these for my safety.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Dobby leaped from his chair, placed a hand on his heart and knelt low in front of Harry. “Dobby swears the house-elf vow that he will answer every question Harry Potter asks him 100 truthfully”.

Harry felt a charge of magic in the air. “What did you do, Dobby? What does that vow mean?” he asked him concernedly.

“It means that if Dobby intentionally lies to Harry Potter he will be struck dead” he said casually, getting to his feet and climbing back on his chair.”

“Er, wow, Dobby. That wasn’t necessary. Your word is good enough for me!” Harry felt rather nervous now, but took a breath and went on. “Ok, first question. Are you owned by Dumbledore or Hogwarts, or are you still a free elf?”

Dobby smiled. “Professor Dumbledore once asked Dobby if he would like to be his elf, but I said no! Dobby is still a free elf, and most of the elves at Hogwarts aren’t owned by anyone, but consider themselves property of the current headmaster.”

“So if you wanted to, you could leave Hogwarts? Do you have any loyalty to Dumbledore over me?” Harry looked at him earnestly.

“Does Mr. Harry Potter want a house-elf?” Dobby’s voice grew notably more high-pitched and excited. “Because, because, that “and Dobby’s voice went quiet, “would be a dream come true for Dobby.” He looked up at Harry with the longing of a dog in a cage at the shelter.

Harry’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “You’d rather be my elf than free, Dobby?”

“Freedom is wonderful, Mr. Harry Potter. It was the best thing in the world after,” Dobby’s voice grew quiet again, “the M-M-M, my last masters. But house-elves are made to serve. We want to be part of a family, sir, more than anything.”

“Dobby,” Harry spoke earnestly, “I need you, but you might not want to be my elf after I tell you some of the background. Promise me what we are saying will not leave this room for any reason? And I don’t need another vow from you.”

“Dobby promises, sir”. The hope and excitement shining from Dobby’s face was almost painful to watch. “Nothing the great Harry Potter could say would keep me from wanting to be his elf, but I promise. I will share this with no one!”

Harry got up and paced the room a bit. “Dobby, I have learned this summer from the goblins that Professor Dumbledore is not my friend.” Fascinated, Harry noticed that Dobby had a vaguely guilty expression on his face. “I found out that he put me in this house

against the express wishes of my parent's will, he has stolen huge amounts of money from me, has always read my mail, and has worked to keep me weak, untrained, and unprepared to defeat Voldemort."

The elf looked miserable. "Dobby suspected something like that – every time the subject of Harry Potter came up, the headmaster would dismiss Dobby from the room. Elves can *feel* things, if you know what I mean sir. While Dobby worked for the headmaster, he could not come and talk about suspicions. But," Dobby looked up at Harry, his eyes blazing with pride, "if Dobby had heard of a threat against Harry Potter, if Dobby had *learned* something, he would come. You know he would, sir!"

Harry sat down again. He purposely took Dobby's hand and held it. "Dobby – I want you to be my elf. Someday I'll live in one of the homes I've inherited and you can be a proper elf, but for now it would mean staying at Hogwarts and pretending you are still a free elf, and spying for me if you can."

Tears were flowing down the elf's face. "Dobby would be honored, Harry Potter sir!"

"Also," Harry continued, "I need to learn about the house elves. What are you guys like? Your family lives, government? What do house-elves want for house-elves? I know you don't want freedom for the most part, but what do you guys really want and need?"

Dobby gasped. "The great Harry Potter cares about house-elves? You *are* too great and kind, master!"

"Dobby," Harry grew serious, "house-elves are noble and powerful. I saw how you threw Lucius Malfoy down the hall with a snap of your fingers. I saw how Malfoy didn't even try to duel you. The house-elf has been ignored and overlooked for too long. If Voldemort wins, his hatred of anything that isn't 100 pureblood wizard will wipe out everything I love, including goblins, half-giants, and house-elves. I need to learn everything I can from everyone I can to defeat him. Then I need to learn how to deal with Dumbledore. He's used a lot of people over the years, and it seems that his goal might be to take over the Ministry – I have to find out what his plans are and keep him

from finding out that I'm onto him. Now, I release you from your vow of honesty – you have fulfilled it.”

Dobby once more jumped from his seat and knelt in front of Harry. “Dobby the house-elf hereby swears to serve Harry Potter until he dies or is given clothes. Dobby will never betray his master’s trust or secrets. Dobby will clean, cook, and serve Harry Potter and his family and friends. Harry Potter’s wishes are Dobby’s wishes.” He stood up, took Harry’s hand and placed it on his head.

Harry could feel the magic swirl around the room again, and knew that they were now under a magical contract. “I, Harry Potter, promise to be a fair and kind master to Dobby. Dobby’s needs are my needs. I will protect and keep Dobby safe as long as I live.”

Tears once again flowed down the elf’s face, and Harry felt choked up him self. “Dobby will teach Harry Potter all about the house-elves, and teach you our magic. It’s not complicated like goblin – we are real good at popping and we are real good at talking long distances though – Harry Potter will like that!”

“So,” Sirius spoke from his painting, “are you going to introduce me, or go straight to kissing?”

Harry laughed and said “Dobby, meet my godfather’s portrait, Sirius. Sirius, meet Dobby”. Dobby bowed formally to Sirius, who grinned at him.

“May Dobby ask master a question?” Dobby spoke hesitantly.

“First of all Dobby, go back to calling me Harry Potter, please! And let’s establish some guidelines. You may *a/ways* ask me questions. If I ever accidentally throw you some clothes or hand you some to put away with out thinking, please ask – don’t think I threw you out! No more punishing yourself! You are a great guy, and it distresses me when you hurt yourself. When I ask you to do something complicated, like spying, you need to take time to eat and sleep – and that’s an order!”

“Harry Potter is kind and generous” Dobby wept. He dried his eyes on a large lace hanky and looked up at him. “I will be busy spying. I think

you need another house-elf. With another elf near you all the time, they could tend to your needs and deliver mail by popping – the headmaster can't read your mail then!"

"Really, Dobby? That's fantastic! Would another elf be ok with you – would you be jealous or anything?" Harry rubbed his jaw pondering.

"Dobby will always be Harry Potter's first house-elf! And if Harry Potter has more than one house, he will need many more than just Dobby to be comfortable."

"How's Winky doing, Dobby? I always felt awful for her – Crouch really treated her bad." Harry thought back to his fourth year, and the poor house elf that Mr. Crouch had fired so unfairly for trying to watch his son who was hiding from the law.

The elf smiled widely at Harry. "She is doing a little better, Harry Potter Sir. She quit drinking but she pines. I think she would be an excellent choice for you."

With a grin Harry called out "Winky!"

The faint 'pop' of elf apparition was heard, and Winky stood before Harry. She did look better than the last time he saw her. Although she was still wearing the same blue dress, it was spotless and didn't reek of butterbeer anymore. She wasn't puffy and red from sobbing, but there was still a palatable aura of sadness and defeat that radiated from her.

"Harry Potter sir!" she squeaked in her high voice. "How may Winky serve you?" She glanced over at Dobby with a question in her eyes.

"Winky?" Harry knelt down in front of her. "Are you still a free elf?"

A rouge tear escaped from one eye, but she nodded yes without hysterics. "To my and my relative's shame, sir, yes."

Harry looked at her sympathetically. "Winky, I think you got a raw deal from your former masters. I know you will not speak badly of them, and I admire your loyalty. Mr. Crouch had no right to expect

you to keep such awful secrets and then fire you when you did nothing wrong.”

“But I disobeyed master!” she wailed. “Winky was a bad house-elf!”

“No” Harry interrupted the sobbing elf. “You were put in a no-win situation. Winky, if you had stayed in the box at the Quiddich cup and didn’t follow Barty, what would have happened?”

“Master Barty was a b-b-bad boy” Winky sniffed in a low voice. “Master Crouch would have fired Winky for not following him.”

“Winky, did you show Barty my wand in my pocket, point it out to him?” Harry asked her earnestly.

She drew herself up indignantly. “No, Mr. Potter sir!”

“Of course you didn’t. Don’t you see, Winky? Mr. Crouch was so full of guilt and desperation; he felt he had to blame somebody. It was his fault he broke the law to sneak his son back. It was his fault he was trying to control him with illegal curses. And no matter what you did, he would have been angry and given you clothes. You are a good and loyal elf, and he didn’t deserve you.”

“You are too kind, Mr. Potter sir” the elf sniffed, slowly regaining control of her emotions.

“So Winky, would you like to be my elf? Dobby just gave me his oath of loyalty, and I have need for another elf. I need someone like you – full of love and devotion to help me.”

Harry would never forget the joy and hope that spread across Winky’s face. It was as if she was opening the curtains to let the sun shine on her shattered heart. She gasped a coupled times, looked wildly over at Dobby to see him nod reassuringly, and grasped Harry’s hands, laying her wet cheeks against them in adoration.

“Winky would be the happiest elf in the world, Mr. Potter Sir!” she crooned.

“No Winky wouldn’t” laughed Dobby, “Dobby already is that!”

Still kneeling in front of Winky, Harry exchanged vows with her. "Winky, I need to cover some ground rules with you now. Dobby has already heard this. You may always ask me questions. If I ever accidentally throw you some clothes or hand you some to put away without thinking, please ask – don't think I threw you out! No punishing yourself because it distresses me when you hurt yourself. When I ask you to do something complicated, you need to take time to eat and sleep because I want you in good health. If you guys are sick, or in need, you must tell me. I will never punish you if you need some time for yourselves."

The elf gasped and looked at Harry disbelievingly. "Master is too kind and generous! I will be a good house-elf for the kind and great Mr. Potter."

"While I'm at Hogwarts," Harry continued, "I will need the both of you to pretend you are still working for the school. I don't want anyone but my closest friends to know you two are mine. This isn't because I am embarrassed of you" Harry broke in when he saw a look of shame on Winky's face, "but for your safety and mine. Winky, as Dobby will tell you, I have discovered this summer that Dumbledore and Ron and Ginny Weasley are not my friends. They mean me harm and have done many bad things. They are not working for Voldemort, but I need to keep the fact I know about them secret while I train hard to defeat Voldy. I can now do goblin magic, and I wish to learn house-elf history and magic from you two – they must not find out."

Winky nodded at Harry with palatable relief.

"When I'm done with Hogwarts you both will be proper house elves – I've inherited several properties, and I have no idea what shape they are in. Of course I'll be living in at least one of them. So don't worry – this weird secret stuff will not be forever." Harry smiled at her kindly, and she returned the look with adoration. "Dobby will not be around me much – he's got special spy duties and will report to me on occasion, or give you the messages. I'll need you, Winky; to attend to my personal needs and to deliver letters so Dumbledore can't read them."

"It will be an honor, sir" Winky spoke with pride.

“Super!” Harry got stiffly off the floor. “Now, let me take you downstairs to your rooms. You can stay there all you want when you aren’t working at Hogwarts, or just need a break”. He took them into his trunk and showed them the large elf-sized room he made above the closet, and altered it into two rooms. “It’s not an attic – I know house-elves like attics, so it’s the closest I could come. But it’s a whole lot nicer than a pile of rags behind a water heater.”

To say Dobby and Winky were touched was the understatement of the century. They both sobbed and wept with happiness, praising Harry until he turned beet red from embarrassment. They oooh and aaahed over the elf sized beds and furniture.

“Now that we’ve been here we can pop in any time we like, sir” Dobby said with a pleased nod.

“Super” Harry smiled, “Now let’s share a pot of tea and have a talk about house-elves throughout history.”

**oOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

House-elves were so unique in Harry’s opinion. So overlooked and yet so powerful. So powerful yet so humble. He had put the time slowing charms on the room so Winky and Dobby wouldn’t be missed at Hogwarts, and proceeded to learn all he can about the elves, which was surprisingly little. House-elves kept no written histories about themselves, but told stories of loyalty or ‘perversion’ (elves who put their own needs above their master’s) to their children or shared them through their unique sixth-sense.

It turned out that elves had honed their magic over the centuries to be able to communicate telepathically with other house-elves, or to be able to sense the needs of their masters. They had no skills with Occlumency or Legilimency, but could send out communication to all elves when in need, or private messages to one another.

An example of this skill, Harry learned, was used when a wizard wished to hold a large party or event. This would be a huge task for one or two elves, so they would send out the call for assistance. Any elves working in un-lived in homes (which is pretty common in the wizarding world) or unemployed elves would come and work in the

kitchens and background, unseen and unknown by the wizards of the house. Elves in this situation were under a bond of secrecy and discretion not to hurt the master's privacy or give secrets away. This assistance would leave the master's elves free to wait on guests – the only elves to be noticed by the wizards.

House-elves were truly only happy when they were owned by a wizard who wanted them and protected them. No matter how abusive a wizard was, it was almost always preferable to the shame of being given clothes. Dobby was considered a pervert in the elf world – his adoption into Harry's family would restore his reputation.

House-elves would marry with the permission of their owner, who would rarely refuse. Children would not be property of the wizard however – they would be free to be purchased when of age, and the majority of the money went to an account in Gringotts which the goblins hold for the use of the house-elves. This money (which Harry thought to himself must be a huge amount), could be used by elves in serious need – for themselves or to help their masters. The remainder of the cost of the elf would go to the wizard. While the children were young, the mother's duties would be taken over by another elf that was currently in need of work.

No one knows where house-elves came from or when they started to serve wizards. The earliest written records, dating far before Merlin, do mention them occasionally. But who the first wizard was to have a house-elf, and why they chose to serve is a mystery that no one seems to ponder. It just always has been, as far as the elves are concerned.

Elves consider it unforgivable to betray a master. In the case of extreme betrayal, the elves themselves will band together to give punishment. Harry's eyebrows shot up at that. "Then what about Kretcher?" he asked bitterly. "I can't think of a bigger case of betrayal than what he did to Sirius."

"Pardon, Harry Potter Sir?" Dobby and Winky looked at each other questioningly.

Harry was dumbfounded. They hadn't known that Kretcher intentionally did not answer Harry in the floo and let him think Sirius

was at the Department of Mysteries. His evasiveness and lying led Sirius to his death. But then, he realized how would they know? So Harry gave them the story, his hands clenched in anger on the table.

“You guys can see why I don’t want to visit Grimmauld Place” Harry told them. “The memories are too bitter, and I’m afraid I’d kill Kretcher if I see him. He has no regrets. I suppose I should feel sorry for him somehow, as he is crazy, but I can’t. It hurts too much.”

“Here, here!” Sirius chimed in from the painting. “I always hated that little toad.”

“Why doesn’t his master give him clothes?” Winky asked hesitantly.

“Remus can’t, Winky.” Harry grumbled. “Grimmauld Place is the meeting place for The Order Of The Phoenix. He knows too much. If Remus lets him go he will find Bellatrix, whom he feels is a ‘proper master’, and we don’t want him telling her stuff!”

The two house-elves closed their eyes a moment, distress showing on their honest faces. After a brief time they blinked and faced Harry. “Forgive us, Harry Potter sir. We elves knew that Kretcher was sick in the head, but we was not knowing he was a- a- *pervert*”. They both blanched when Dobby whispered the last word. “We will take care of him for you.” And with that, both elves popped out of the room before Harry’s astonished eyes.

Harry barely had time to register that they were gone when the familiar ‘pop’ was heard and the two elves reappeared in the room. Dobby and Winky bowed low to Harry, and Dobby said “We have dealt with the pervert and he will never trouble Harry Potter or his friends again. Mr. Lupin will need another elf for Grimmauld Place”.

He gaped at Dobby. “What did you do with him?” he asked, though he thought he might not want to know.

Dobby looked at him steadily. “We gave him house-elf justice, sir. We questioned him to be sure that he wasn’t acting under a wizard curse. He wasn’t – he betrayed your godfather of his own will.” Winky looked positively nauseated at the mere thought. “His head is now hanging with his ancestors next to Mrs. Black.”

Harry felt a little queasy, but didn't want to condemn them for following their own traditions. He felt more than a little relieved that he would never have to hear Kretcher's mutterings or see his skulking, murderous face again, or have to keep himself from doing the same.

"Um, thank you, guys. You saved us a lot of grief. I don't understand your world enough yet, but I respect it, and what you did had to be done."

The elves nodded solemnly. "Now, Harry Potter sir" Winky spoke up, "Mr. Lupin will need an elf to maintain that home. He will be wanting an elf who is very discreet and good, correct?"

Harry nodded in agreement and watched the elves as they closed their eyes again. He realized that they were communicating with their vast network of fellow house-elves, searching for an elf in need of employment that fit his needs.

They opened their eyes and looked at each other, silently communicating, with doubt in their eyes. Winky finally turned to Harry. "Master, there is a married couple who need work. Their masters and home were destroyed by You-Know-Who recently. But they are not free, and elves are very expensive. The home could use two elves, and I know them personally and can vouch for them. Nodding is my cousin, and I helped them while Blink, his wife, was with child."

He smiled with delight. "They sound perfect, Winky, Dobby. If you vouch for them, that's good enough for me. How much are they and how do I pay? This can be a secret Christmas gift for Moony."

Dobby grinned. "They are 60,000 galleons for both of them. I can transfer the money to Gringotts. They can pop right over for instructions!"

"What a deal!" broke in Sirius. "Thank you, guys, for dealing with that traitorous runt. I should have treated him better – I said myself you can see the measure of a man by how he treats his inferiors. I guess I failed that test. But Harry and Remus – they are good people. He will turn my old home into a happy place once again with your help."

The elves formally bowed to Sirius, closed their eyes, and two elderly elves popped into the room. Their outfits, which were at one point a house uniform of some sort, were dirty and in tatters. Their faces were more lined than Dobby's and Winky's, and they had an air of formal grace about them. With hopeful and polite eyes they faced Harry with short bows.

"Nodding, Blink?" Harry asked the two. "Would you like to work for a friend of mine? Did Dobby and Winky tell you about the job?"

"Yes sir" Nodding spoke up. "We understand you need an unloved home to be cleaned and kept. It is used for a secret organization for the light, and will have constant guests with needs. The mighty Professor Dumbledore is not to be trusted anymore. If anyone would ask where we came from, we will tell them we were replaced by the elves for the injustice of the pervert's actions, and are loyal to the house."

"Perfect!" Harry chirped excitedly. Two more oaths later, and Harry ended the day as master of two very contented house-elves, and Remus Lupin found himself the surprised owner of two delighted elves for himself.

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*Thanks for all the wonderful reviews! I've received a lot of questions with 'what about so and so'. Be patient – this story is 37 chapters long! I've only got one character I really haven't tied up, and when it gets closer to that time, I think I'll have a 'contest' to see who can come up with the best idea of how to handle that individual...*

## Chapter 8

### Birthday Surprises

The next morning dawned bright and warm. Harry started the day with a letter to Hermione, which he gave to Winky to deliver.

*Dear Hermione,*

*I hope you aren't too startled to see Winky. It's a long story, but I now care for Dobby and Winky, and two more named Nodding and Blink who were homeless and needed care, and are now the new elves for Snuffle's old place. Kretcher is gone – the elves have a legal system of sorts and found him guilty. They acted before I could stop them, but I'm not sure I would of wanted too. Hope you aren't mad at me.*

*Please don't be upset with me – Dobby and Winky really wanted to be bound to me. Winky will answer any questions. Dobby will stay at Hogwarts working and keeping an eye on things, if you know what I mean. Winky is my personal companion – she is feeding me and caring for me, and will deliver my messages to those I can trust so I don't have to risk owl mail being read. When you need her to deliver a message, just call her name out loud – she will hear.*

*I need you to learn occlumency from either her or the goblins – I don't want Dumbledore or Voldemort to be able to read your thoughts.*

*So how many times have you read the book I gave you? I'm guessing twice already!*

*Harry*

He handed the letter to Winky. "I trust Hermione completely. Her wishes are my wishes, ok Winky? If she wants you to wait to send a reply, that's ok with me. With a grateful nod, Winky popped away and Harry started on two letters to Luna and Neville, which were identical.

*Dear Neville,*

*How is your holiday so far? How are you doing after all that happened? I still feel really bad about everyone getting hurt, and I*

*really want to apologize for rushing into something so dangerous. You are a great fighter and I'm proud to be your friend. I hope you forgive me.*

Harry paused in his writing. He wished he could see them in person, to see if they could be added to his 'trustworthy friends' list. But until he could be there to use his goblin magic skills to determine their loyalties, he couldn't risk sending Winky and blowing the cover of his new-found spies.

*I was really down at first, but I'm doing my homework now and keeping myself busy and feel much better. I can't wait for the new school year to start.*

*Harry*

He wrote the same letter to Luna, and a quick note to the order to let them know he was fine, and sent them off with Hedwig. The owl was quite offended that he had given his first letter to an elf instead of herself, but after a couple of well-aimed nips, she forgave him and took off to deliver his mail.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

*What am I doing in Tom's head? I haven't had pain or nightmares since Griphook's teachings? What is he looking at?*

Harry was looking over the now familiar dungeon room through the eyes of Voldemort. He could hear Voldemort's voice and see what he saw, but the sharing of emotions was now gone.

"Crucio" came the high, hissing voice. A young girl, maybe 12 years of age, was bound and held in front of him by two masked Death Eaters. She screamed and jerked, crying and sobbing hysterically. The wizard casually lifted the curse, and Harry was shocked that he could actually hear Tom's thoughts.

*Where is Potter? Why haven't I felt him all summer? This should have brought him around. Could he be dead? Or overseas perhaps?*

Harry was shocked. Voldemort couldn't feel his presence? The next time the evil wizard's eyes shut, Harry tried to will himself back to his body. But when Tom's eyes were open again, Harry was horrified to see he was still there. Quickly re-enforcing his mental shields, Harry could feel himself panicking. What if he was trapped in Voldemort's mind forever?

*"Well, this is going no where"* hissed Voldemort angrily. *"Avada Kedavra!"* and the young girl collapsed lifeless to the dungeon floor.

"Master? Kind master? Please wake up!"

Harry flung himself up, and found himself in his bed in Godric's Suitcase. Sweat was pouring off of him, and he trembled with exhaustion and fear. Lying back down, he was surprised to find his head resting in Winky's lap, who was wiping his brow with her apron, and crooning at him.

Winky handed him his glasses. "Master, are you ok now? Winky found you were having a bad dream and tried to wake you."

He let out a slow sigh of relief. "Thanks, Winky. That was the first vision I've shared with Voldemort since my goblin training. And he couldn't feel me this time. Boy, do I owe Griphook big time for this!" Then Harry recalled the young girl being tortured, then killed by Voldemort, and a tear escaped out of his eye.

"Good Master, why is you crying?" Winky wiped his eyes and stroked his hair.

"Oh Winky" he sobbed, "he was torturing a girl. Just a kid! He was trying to get my attention, but thought he failed. He didn't care about that poor girl at all – I could hear his thoughts! Then he just killed her because he thought he couldn't get to me. Why aren't I strong enough to take him down!"

"The elves will help you, Master." Winky soothed him. "You will be. That you can hear You-Know-Who's thoughts is big weapon against him. Winky teach you elf magic so you can go in or leave his head whenever you want."

Harry sat up. "You can do that?"

"Oh yes – you have the link already. Winky just has to teach you how to use it better. You see – great and kind Master will win. Now lay down, Winky help you fall asleep again – no dreams."

He took off his glasses and laid them on his nightstand. He glanced around the blurry image of his room. *His* room – Godric's Suitcase was the first place he ever had that was truly his. He felt himself relaxing, despite the horrible sight he had just witnessed. Winky caressed his brow and started singing a lullaby. At first Harry bristled at the thought that maybe Winky thought he was a baby, but then realized just how soothing it was. "I wonder if my mum sang like this to me?" he thought.

"Why is my master still crying?" Winky asked, shaken that perhaps she was bothering him.

"I've never been sang to like that" Harry explained, embarrassed. "It's nice".

"Master never had a lullaby?" Winky gasped. "Master never had comfort as a child? May I see?"

He wasn't sure what she meant, so he nodded. He felt Winky enter his thoughts, swiftly and gently. It wasn't the whisper of Dumbledore or the battering of Snape, or the stealth of Griphook. It was, well, house-elvish. She gently, with an organized touch, quickly skipped over all his childhood up to Hagrid's first visit at age 11. She didn't pry into his thoughts and feelings, just over the Dursley's treatment of him, as if watching a movie. Harry didn't feel violated, or even like he had revealed secrets.

"Poor Master!" Winky now had tears dripping down her own cheeks. "How can you be so good and kind when treated so badly? Winky sing you to sleep, and Winky is here always when you need her."

And the little elf sang her heart out, quietly, softly, lovingly, and Harry drifted off, a gentle child-like smile of hope on his lips.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

It was 11:30, the next night, and Harry was fast asleep in Dudley's second bedroom. He decided to sleep 'upstairs' that night so he could listen for Hedwig or other owls. He was on the verge of wakefulness, with the unconscious impression of hearing giggles and whispering, but not enough to shake him from his heavy slumber.

Midnight came and Harry was woken by loud yells of HAPPY BIRTHDAY and the crash of several large bodies jumping on his bed and body. He flung himself upright in a panic reaching for his wand, which wasn't handy as usual. Grabbing his glasses, he gaped uncomprehendingly around him, still a touch fuzzy-headed. The room was filled with smiling faces – the twins, Lupin, Tonks, and Dumbledore. A quick glance upon donning his glasses, and he could see the portrait of Sirius was gone and the elves were nowhere in sight.

"Shhhh!" Harry whispered frantically, goggling at the streamers, confetti, and fireworks the twins were setting off in his room, "you must have woken up my relatives!"

But Uncle Vernon the Rhinoceros never came crashing through the door, and the crowd was laughing joyfully. "Nah – no worry" leered Fred at Harry.

"We charmed the room for silence, young Harry" chimed in George.

"And we've come to take you to Headquarters for your birthday" continued Fred,

"And for the rest of the summer"

"If you like" they finished together.

"Wha-wha – sure!" stuttered Harry. But all the time he was making sure his thought's defenses were firmly in place, and wondered where the elves had gone off to with Sirius. So much for training over the summer, he thought to himself, forcing himself not to look disappointed.

With jubilant flair the crowd threw Harry's stuff in his trunk, not realizing it was a new trunk with a hidden secret, Dumbledore

charmed his pajamas into clothing. Harry pried up the loose floorboard under his bed and brought out some wrapped up stale food to throw in the trunk – if he didn't have things hidden in his room, Dumbledore could get suspicious.

“Have we got everything?” Tonks grinned at him. Harry nodded and she shrank his trunk to the size of a small box of chocolates and tossed it to him. He winced slightly, knowing that if Winky and Dobby were in there, they were fine and not crushed or even jostled, but it still seemed, well, weird.

Dumbledore charmed a birthday hat into a portkey for Grimmauld Place. Everyone touched it and Harry could feel the familiar jerking sensation behind his navel. He was off.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry arrived in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place with the customary stumbling and falling. He noticed the only people who seemed to land gracefully were the aurors and Dumbledore. The rest were staggering and clutching for balance. “I’ve got to learn that trick,” Harry thought to himself.

His friends once more crowded around him with hugs and cheers, and in the room were also Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Hermione, and Professor McGonagall. He was delighted to see a large banner saying “Happy Birthday Harry” strung across the room. He also noticed the place looked different – happier, cleaner, less dark, if that made sense. “What happened here?” he asked innocently.

Remus raised an eyebrow and was the first to speak. “Yes, well. It seems the house-elf government or whatever caught wind of Kretcher’s treachery, and took matters into their own hands. They have replaced him with Nodding and Blink, a married couple.”

With that, the two new elves popped into the kitchen, faced Harry and bowed. “Greetings and Happy Birthday, Mr. Potter” they spoke in unison, acting like they had never met him before.

Harry grinned at them “thanks! The place looks much better already, and I’ve only seen the kitchen!” The elves looked extremely pleased,

and started to serve up a huge birthday cake and pumpkin juice. Harry stared at the cake – frosting and icing letters saying “Happy Birthday Harry” and 16 candles on top.

“Aren’t you going to make a wish?” Ron sputtered impatiently, and everyone laughed to hear his stomach growling.

Harry looked blankly at the crowd of well-wishers. “Um... is that what I’m supposed to do?”

Mrs. Weasley burst into her customary motherly tears. “Oh dear – don’t tell me you’ve never had a birthday cake before?” she sobbed.

He blushed furiously. “Sorry... um, this is a first. But it’s really cool!”

Hermione smoothly broke in to break up the shock. “Nothing to it, Harry. You close your eyes, make a wish, and then blow out all the candles with one breath. If you do that, your wish is supposed to come true. It’s a tradition with both wizards and muggles!”

Harry grinned and closed his eyes. *I wish to stop Voldemort and Dumbledore, and live a normal life real soon!* He opened his eyes and blew them out.

“I hope that wish had something to do with me” a silky voice purred at his elbow. Glancing over Harry saw Ginny giving him cow eyes. He smiled with embarrassment, and Mrs. Weasley proceeded to smack her daughter in the back of the head.

*“Not bloody likely, you little tart”* Harry thought to himself. But he gave her an ‘ol’-Harry shy grin’ and proceeded to cut the cake. Ron glowered at him when he thought he wasn’t looking, and Dumbledore wore his usual thoughtful gaze, but everything and everyone seemed as normal as ever.

“Presents now!” Tonks called out cheerfully as she got up to clear the dishes, but Molly and Ginny swiftly stopped her and took over before her legendary clumsiness caused any birthday mishaps. Fred and George brought over a large pile of brightly wrapped gifts and placed them on the table in front of Harry.

“Wow, guys – aren’t you sure you’d rather be in bed?” Harry was touched and pleased.

“Nonsense, young Harry” laughed George.

“Can’t have you moping around all summer, now can we?” chimed in Fred.

“Open ours first!” They crowed together.

“Um, at a distance or under water?” Harry asked nervously, but proceeded to tear off the paper with abandon.

The twins gave Harry a very large and generous box of Wheezes. There were several skiving snack boxes, canary creams, and the usual. There was also his own extendable ear, which he discretely pocketed before anyone else noticed it.

He also got a large box of Honeydukes sweets from Ron and his parents, a book on advanced transformation from McGonagall, an arm wand-holster from Tonks, and a book on defense from Hermione. Remus gave him framed photo of Sirius and him together taken last Christmas, which brought a tear to his eye.

Ginny then threw her arms around him, causing him to blush furiously again. “Open mine now, Harry!”

“Oooh yes, please!” the twins minced in unison, acting as girly as possible, to everyone’s hysterical delight. Ginny punched each boy in the arm and sat in Harry’s lap, much to his extreme embarrassment, and handed him a small box. Mrs. Weasley’s lips were pinched with disapproval, mirrored closely in McGonagall’s face, and he looked at them helplessly.

He opened the box swiftly, trying to figure how to get the girl off his lap without hurting her feelings or making anyone suspicious. Inside was a chain and pendant of a small silver stag. “Prongs” he said softly, and felt a sudden, suspicious surge of love and trust for Ginny. “Thank you” he spoke softly, “it’s very nice”.

*“And very charmed, I’m sure”* Harry thought to himself. *“I can’t wait to check this stuff over for auras”*. But he allowed Ginny to clasp it around his neck and gave her a brief brotherly hug, which she returned a bit too warmly, and slid off his lap, much to Harry’s relief.

“Mine’s last, my boy” Dumbledore handed him a large, heavy package, eyes twinkling away.

Harry carefully blocked his mind. *Yeah – always last, always the center of attention*. He tore the paper off to see a penseive – like Dumbledore’s but smaller.

“Wow” Harry spoke at last. “These are really expensive, aren’t they professor?”

Dumbledore puffed out his chest a bit, with a cloyingly modest look on his face. “You are worth it, Harry. It will help you organize your thoughts and keep your emotions in check.”

“So how does it work? If I siphon off a memory and put it in, will I forget it?” Harry could see some use in that, but it also seemed dangerous.

“No, but memories you choose to store will be softened in your mind – not so ‘up front’, if that makes sense. You will be able to recall anything you choose, but it can make it less annoying. It also really helps to be able to view memories again – you can see all the details and exact words your memory tends to forget or change over time – the penseive is always accurate. That’s why they can be used in court.”

“Thank you. Thank you everyone. And thanks for my yearly rescue!” Harry grinned at the crowd. But now that the excitement had died a bit, Harry couldn’t help but feel a bit depressed, as he glanced around the room. He noticed the chair Sirius always sat in, spied the cup on the shelf Sirius preferred for his coffee, and recalled snatches of conversations with his godfather held in that room. Although three years had passed with Griphook thanks to the goblin time-bending, he needed to act the part of the freshly grieving god son, and not much of it was an act.

As everyone milled around finishing up a last couple bites of cake, he indulged in a goblin-glimpse into people's minds. He felt a little guilty doing it, and wondered how Snape and Dumbledore felt when they were poking around people's heads uninvited. But his safety was up to him now – Harry needed to find out who he could truly trust.

As Ginny was hovering near, he picked her first. *How much longer does 'Uncle Whiskers' expect me to play this prat? How dense can a boy be – I practically threw myself on him. A hug? Just a hug? I really would like to have the benefit of being known as the girlfriend of the 'Boy-Who-Lived', but sheesh – he's such a geek. Oh well, I'll keep playing as long as Dumbledore's paying....*

Harry winced although he was trying to keep his spying secret. *"I've got to keep my face more neutral!"* He looked over at Arthur Weasley and listened in.

*Got to have a talk with Ginny – that was not really appropriate. Are they going out perhaps? Harry looked as surprised as we did. Poor boy – first birthday cake? I wonder why Dumbledore wants us to keep such a close eye on him – he seems like a lost kid in desperate need of a childhood – not some threat or whatever.*

So Mr. Weasley wasn't really sold on keeping Harry weak? There seemed to be honest affection in his thoughts towards him. He turned to Molly next.

*That girl of mine is SO grounded! Poor Harry – if I EVER get to give the Dursley's a piece of my mind! Such a sweet boy....*

Molly's mindset seemed to be like her husband's. They had strong loyalty to Dumbledore with just the whisper of questioning and doubt, and strong love for himself. If he was more Slytherin he could exploit that, but for now he will trust them in the minimum sense.

Harry skipped the twins and Hermione, knowing where their loyalties lay. He looked at Tonks and took a peek into her mind, and swiftly backed out, blushing. He knew she was attracted to Moony, but gosh – she was *really* attracted! He didn't even try to read Remus – no more thoughts like that before bed time!

He took a glance into McGonagall's mind. *What is Albus playing at with that pensieve. Perhaps he doesn't realize what it does? I'll ask him later in private.....* Harry was shocked to see the thought struck from the professor's mind as if erased. He looked around and saw Dumbledore staring at her from across the room. Dumbledore was ease dropping too, and erased her thought. Why was McGonagall suspicious about the pensieve, and why didn't Dumbledore want her to be? He had stayed in there long enough to pick up hints of distrust toward the aging headmaster forming around the edges of her mind – he didn't know if Dumbledore was skilled enough to see it.

He had always been told that the great Albus Dumbledore was the greatest Occlumens and Legilimens of their time. He was gifted and powerful, but it was nothing compared to the subtlety of the goblin's ability. As Harry innocently looked around the room pleased with the party, he didn't pick up any suspicion from the headmaster, but wasn't going to risk trying to see into his mind. He took a breath and looked into Ron. This was going to be painful.

*Great big bloody prat. I hate him. How much longer will I have to pretend? I could have cool friends that make me look good, not keep me in the background all the time. Ooooh – I'm such a quiddich star. Ooooooh – I kicked You-Know-Who's arse. Ooooh – the girls think I'm soooo cute. I hope You-Know-Who trounces him to teach him a lesson. Just hurts him good – then I hope Dumbledore takes care of You-Know-Who.*

Yep – that hurt, Harry decided. He's spying on me and he doesn't even know what for. *I don't even know what for* he mused. What is the purpose of keeping me weak and clueless? What are Dumbledore's plans?

The party started to dissolve as yawning people wished Harry their final well wishes and stumbled off to the floo or bed. Harry took a large chunk of cake on a plate “midnight snack!” he grinned at Molly, and turned toward the stairs.

“You'll be sleeping with Ron in the same room as last year, dear! Go ahead and unshrink your trunk – you can do magic here and it's not traceable” she called after him, and he nodded back to see Ron

giving him a bored look while he chowed down more cake. Harry gave his surrogate mum a heartfelt hug. “Thanks for the cake and everything” he whispered, and headed up.

He entered the room and took his miniaturized trunk out of his pocket. Placing it on the floor at the foot of his bed, he enlarged it and swiftly cast silencing and time slowing charms in the room. He opened the lid and bounded down the stairs into Godric’s Suitcase.

“Winky, Dobby?” Harry called. Dobby popped in front of him, and Winky climbed down out of her room above the closet, rubbing her eyes. “Are you guys ok? Were you in my room when Dumbledore apparated in?”

Winky laughed, which sounded so much better than all the sobbing she use to do. “I was in your room, master. When I felt the magic from apparition enter the room, I grabbed Mr. Sirius’ portrait and popped into here.”

Harry glanced over to the fireplace and saw Sirius, who waved at him. “Whew! We are now at Grimmauld Place. Are you ok from the trip? Were you jostled or anything?”

“You are so kind to ask, master! Winky is fine – inside Godric’s Suitcase is in another place – I wasn’t affected one bit. And Winky can hear from in here if master has bad dreams – I’ll wait in here for your call or needs.”

“Another place?” Harry asked, puzzled. “Oh – another dimension!”

“I’ve nothing new to report, sir” said Dobby. I work in the kitchens, though there isn’t much to do in the summer, and I keep my ears open for any news Harry Potter might need”.

Harry nodded with approval. “Well, I brought you guys a hunk of my birthday cake! Please enjoy!”

The two elves just stared with open mouths. “Wow – the great Harry Potter shares his birthday cake with lowly house-elves!” Dobby breathed reverently. Harry hoped they’d get over their hero-worship soon.

“Goodnight, my friends! I’ll come down as soon as I can get some privacy!” Harry waved, returned to the room and removed all the charms. As he was changing into his pajamas, Ron came in the room and wished him a goodnight, and they finally went to sleep.

## Chapter 9

### A Second Childhood

The house woke late the next day, and people drifted like zombies down the stairs in twos and threes to grab a late breakfast. Yawning but hospitable, Molly cheerfully served them all.

Harry, however, pretended to snooze on when Ron dressed and left the room, shooting a dirty look at him as he walked out the door. Harry sat and looked around. Swiftly he removed the necklace Ginny gave him and laid it on the dresser next to the penseive from Dumbledore. Rubbing his Potter ring twice he glanced around the room. The necklace glowed the familiar blue of a loyalty charm. *"No surprises there"*, Harry scowled to himself. Next, the penseive glowed a strange shade of green. *What does this mean?* Harry pondered. *That color means some sort of security leak...what and how?*

Casting a quick bubble shield around Ginny's gift, he put it back on to avoid suspicion, and was relieved to see the brief attraction he had felt the night before was gone. He dressed and went down to breakfast.

"Happy Birthday again, Harry dear" Molly crooned at him. "Eat up – you are skin and bones."

Harry grinned at her. Actually, with the three-year training and good nutrition he received from Griphook he was looking rather good, but it was useless to argue against the formidable matron of the Weasley Clan. He could have waddled in looking like Dudley and she would have said the same thing.

He finished up his eggs and sausages and looked around. The house-elves were busy assisting Molly, who was obviously quite fond of them. Hermione was growling something to Ron in the corner about OWLS, while they finished up the last of their meal. He assumed the twins were off to the shop, and there was no sign of Moony or Tonks, so Harry wandered out to the hall. He was gazing up at the stuffed elf heads and was disgusted to see the new addition. Ugly, gnarled Kretcher gazed out with glassy blank eyes. He

grimaced at the sight, and before he knew it, had bumped the portrait of Mrs. Black.

Crazy old Mrs. Black, Sirius' mother. The most memorable thing about Grimmauld Place was that everyone was greeted by the insane screeches of the woman who hated all mud bloods, half bloods, half breeds, and people who didn't meet her standards (which was just about everyone). He winced, waiting for the yelling, but nothing happened. Opening one hesitant eye, he peeked at the portrait, and was amazed to see her curtsying politely. "My Lord" she said humbly "how may I serve you?"

Unconsciously Harry felt the Black signet ring camouflaged on his left hand. "Um, how are you today, Mrs. Black?"

The unattractive woman actually blushed. "Thank you for asking, my Lord. I'm well. And thank you for lifting the curse on my painting. I really didn't enjoy being so unpleasant."

"Er, how did I do that?" Harry asked curiously.

"When the Lord of house entered, it lifted the curse of insanity. Sadly, my son was never made Lord because of being wanted, and I had no control over my vile tongue. With the curse controlling me, I had disowned him and lost any chance of recovery."

"Gosh" said Harry, "you are going to be a lot easier to live with now. But please don't tell anyone that I've inherited the title – I don't want anyone to know yet." Mrs. Black did not look pleased. "It's not that I'm ashamed, my Lady. But I have enemies close by that must not know yet. Why don't you take a vacation? Your son's portrait is in my trunk upstairs – I'm sure he'd welcome a sane conversation with you."

Her eyes lit up. "Sirius has a portrait? He is here? I have a chance to make amends then. Yes, my Lord, I will do so. When it is safe to come back out, please let me know." And with a curtsy, she walked out of her frame and Harry pulled the curtains shut.

Harry shook his head. This was a summer to never forget. He proceeded to wander the house a bit, please to see how Nodding and Blink had really cleaned up the place. The windows sparkled, the wall

paper was stripped, and carpets replaced. You no longer had the feeling of 'dark wizard lives here' when entering a room. Harry walked into the parlor and saw Lupin sitting in a leather chair, reading the Daily Prophet.

"Moony – how are you doing?" Harry asked him. The graying man set his paper down and sighed a bit, gazing at him with tired looking eyes. Harry sat down in a chair next to him and could feel the sorrow radiating off the man.

"I'm hanging in, Harry. More importantly, how are you doing?" The werewolf searched his face.

Harry smiled sadly. "I really want to talk with you soon, some place private. I've been dealing with it, I suppose." Harry paused and took a shuddering breath. "At first I was really blaming my self, and I was scared you would blame me too..."

He didn't get a chance to finish what he was saying. Tears dripping down the tired face, Lupin jumped to his feet and knelt down in front of Harry. Grasping his hands, he barely choked out "Don't ever think that, Harry. I don't blame you. We all made mistakes, but it all boils down to Voldemort – he's the one to blame. Sirius was hot-headed and knew he was running into a trap. He wanted to be there for you."

The two embraced in an awkward hug, but both felt better. They shared a bit about favorite times with his godfather, and Harry, looking around, suddenly asked, "Moony, where is Hagrid? I didn't get my rock-cake from him this year."

The graying werewolf smiled. "Order business, Harry. He's fine last we heard."

After a bit more chatting, Harry excused himself from the room.

*"I'd love to visit with Sirius right now"* Harry thought to himself. *"I also want to send a letter to Griphook"*.

At that moment Molly Weasley came from the kitchen with Ron. "Harry dear" she crooned, "I'm sorry we haven't had time to discuss

this with you, but your godfather left us money to re-locate. I'm sure you agree the Burrow probably isn't safe anymore."

"Did you sell it?" Harry asked, his heart dropping. The Burrow was like home to him, even if Ron and Ginny weren't on his top 10 list of favorite people at the moment.

"No, dear" she continued, "but we have bought a new property. I'm taking the family with me, along with Nodding and Blink to help us move as quick as possible. I wish I could bring you and Hermione, but Dumbledore said the fewer people who know where we live, the better." Mrs. Weasley looked extremely unhappy as she explained the secrecy. "Try not to feel too left out or bored – Remus is here, and order members will be flooing in and out. And try not to abuse your ability to use magic here."

With that the red heads went back to the kitchen, grabbed a handful of floo powder, and disappeared.

Hermione came around the corner. She glanced around and tugged Harry up the stairs towards his bedroom. Making sure the coast was clear, he shut the door and charmed the room for the usual.

"What's up?" Harry smiled at Hermione.

"Well, I wanted to give you your real birthday present, but I have to give it to you in private"

Harry blushed and started thinking uncomfortable thoughts. Hermione noticed his flushed face and punched him in the arm.

"What are you thinking, Harry? Here!" And she reached under her sweater and handed him a small gift wrapped nicely.

"Oh, I, um, sorry!" he squeaked with cracking voice, and tore off the paper. It looked like a planner. *Great – another homework aid* he thought to himself.

She pulled a matching one out from her sweater. "Now I know you are thinking it's another homework planner, but look" and she opened the two binders. "When you go to the blank page after the 'to-do' list,

and write in it..." she wrote hurriedly on her page, "it instantly appears on yours! We can communicate from anywhere, and its security charmed to only work for us."

"Wow, Hermione! This is super!" Harry gushed excitedly. "Thanks! Now let me show you the other toy I got when I bought our satchels!"

Harry bent down and popped the latches on his trunk. Opening the lid, Hermione peered over and saw the stairs. "Now where do they go?" she asked dubiously.

"Come on!" Harry grinned and led her down stairs by the hand. "I'd like to welcome you to Godric's Suitcase!" He opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and bowed with a flourish.

She gasped with amazement, eyes darting all over the place. "Harry, this is wonderful!" She walked around the room, taking in all the details. "Hi ya, cutie!" Sirius grinned down at her from his painting above the fireplace.

"Hi Sirius! How do you like your new digs?" Hermione asked him. Then she noticed Mrs. Black, sitting in the portrait with her son, sane and quiet. "Um, hello Mrs. Black?"

"Hello my dear" she nodded gravely. "I'm sorry about all the crude and coarse comments about your parentage. I was not in my right mind, and my speech was controlled by others. I could care less where a witch of your talent comes from." And she curtsied at the open-mouthed girl. "Hello again, my Lord" she greeted Harry.

"How are you doing, my Lady?" Harry bowed politely.

Sirius had a smile a mile-wide. "Hey, cub. Guess who did this to mum?"

Harry looked at them. "Well, I'm ready to blame Dumbledore for everything, including the Grand National debt of the muggles, but what would be his motive?"

The two Blacks frowned darkly, and Harry could really see the family resemblance now.

“Right on one” Sirius growled. “That” (and his godfather bit back a foul word), “*jerk* put a curse of insanity on my mum before she died to get her to disown me. He pulled a lot of strings to get me away from you, Harry. Tried to take my home, got me locked up for 12 years without a trial, and then put an Imperious on Bella to make her push me through the veil. I really hope you take him down, and take him down hard” he spat.

“But *why*?” Harry asked, confused. “What was the big deal of keeping you away from me?”

“Well, I never really trusted him” Sirius scowled. “James and Remus were quite taken with ‘the most powerful wizard in the world’, but I just never quite could feel comfortable about him. Perhaps it’s the Slytherin in my family. After you were born and James and Lily made me your godfather, Dumbledore wanted to be sure *he* was the only hero in your eyes. He probably figured he could gain control of the Black family fortune, too.”

Harry shook his head numbly. He was going to start having more nightmares about Dumbledore than Voldemort.

Winky popped into the room. “Master!” she gushed. “Winky has birthday present for you!” She scurried up into her room over the closet, and came down tugging two large boxes. Dobby popped in with a good sized box of his own, and a fancy cake.

“Happy birthday, Harry Potter Sir!” the elf beamed at him. Swiftly the two elves set up a table with cake and drinks for the four of them, as Harry insisted they sit down with Hermione and himself.

“Wow, guys – you didn’t have to do this!” Harry was touched, as he ate some cake.

“No, sir, we didn’t. But we wanted to!” Dobby was busting with pride.

“Mine first, master!” Winky thrust a large, lightweight box in Harry arms.

He laughed and tore the paper off, and pulled out, to his surprise a very large teddy bear, like muggle kids have, but bigger. It was very

soft and cuddly and Hermione swooned with delight. “Um, thanks?” Harry wasn’t sure how Hermione would react to The-Boy-Who-Lived with a teddy, and if Winky had gone over the bend.

The little elf looked up at Harry with adoring eyes. “When Winky saw Master’s memories, she was sad to think such a good and kind master had never had toys. No toys, no childhood! Winky decided it’s never too late to have a good childhood. I like to sleep with my Mr.Binky meself!” And she held up a very worn and very well-loved stuffed toy flobberworm.

Harry grinned and snatched the teddy out of Hermione’s arms and hugged it. “Hey – this does feel great! But if you ever tell Ron or the guys about this, it’s clothes all around!”

Winky and Dobby gasped and turned pale, and Harry swiftly apologized and convinced him he was only joking. The bear was given a seat at the table, and Harry decided to name him Hagrid, as he was black and hairy, and cuddly despite his size.

He picked up Winky’s other box, which was far heavier and rattled most intriguingly. When the paper came off, he found it was a giant box of LEGO kits and parts.

“LEGO!” screamed Hermione. “Open! Open now!” She looked over at Harry and her jaw dropped for the hundredth time that day. “You don’t even know what LEGO is?”

“Um, no” Harry picked up a box showing a kit of little blocks that would create a car. “It looks way cool though!”

“Oh gosh Harry – I assumed Dudley would have had this stuff – this is timeless fun! Come on, let’s play!”

“Dudley only wanted action toys or computers and stuff. Anything that took thinking or creativity was taboo” Harry said, getting ready to rip open the car kit.

“No, Harry Potter Sir – open mine now!” Dobby hopped up and down, and handed him a box, not quite as large or heavy as the LEGO, but still a great size.

Harry grinned and ripped open the paper. Inside were a dozen or so action figures of wizards, centaurs, elves, goblins, and magical beasts. "Whoa!" Hermione and Harry cooed in unison.

"These are wizard toys, Harry Potter Sir! And I took them out of their boxes so they would be *played* with, not just displayed. Toys need to be played with!"

"Oh yah!" agreed Harry, gazing at all the goodies that had made their way to the floor. Hermione was already on her stomach posing a handsome roan centaur. "You two are the *best!*" And he gathered the two shocked elves into a big hug and gave them each a kiss on their heads.

Tears of gratitude poured down the house-elves' faces. They swiftly cleaned up the cake and dishes, and left the two kids to make complete fools of themselves. Harry was grateful they could spend hours playing because of the time charm, without risk of interruption or being discovered. He glanced over at Hagrid the Teddy. "*Boy, who'd pay more to see that – Draco or Rita Skeeter*" he thought with amusement.

After a few delightful hours of LEGO and wizards, Harry took a quick break to write a letter to Griphook.

*Dear Teacher,*

*I've had a wonderful birthday today, and I owe it to you. Because of your help, I've had access to my money and got the ability to get my trunk and now have the privacy of Godric's Suitcase. I have two wonderful elves to help me, and I'm taking control of my life.*

*One thing that bothers me, though. Dumbledore gave me a penseive for a gift, and it glows the green of security leaks. Would you know what it does? When one of my professors was looking upset about the penseive, Dumbledore modified her memory, so it must be important. I have not used it yet.*

*I'll ask Winky to wait for an answer, or if you wish you can apparate with her back here. I'm in the trunk with my friend Hermione, and the room is charmed for privacy and time.*

*Love,*

*Harry*

“Winky, could you please take this to Griphook at Gringotts? And please wait for an answer”. Winky nodded proudly and popped off.

A few short minutes later, Winky and Griphook apparated into one of the larger shocks of the goblin’s life. There, on the floor of a well-furnished trunk room, lying on his stomach was Lord Potter-Black, The-Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One, fully trained goblin warrior, playing with plastic blocks and action figures. The goblin mused that his student looked content and happy, so he simply smiled in greeting, and chose not to comment on his charge’s choice of recreation.

“Griphook!” Harry called out happily, scrambling to his feet. “Winky and Dobby decided to give me a happy childhood for my birthday!” he gestured at the mess of toys on the floor. “Fun, eh?”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Potter” he nodded sagely. “The house-elves are wise”.

Harry sadly bid Sirius, the elves, and the room good bye for now, and led Griphook and Hermione upstairs to his and Ron’s room and the penseive. He gestured to the carved stone bowl and Griphook proceeded to wave his long fingers in intricate spell work around it. After a few moments he stopped and nodded to Harry.

“You are correct, Mr. Potter. It has Mr. Dumbledore’s scent all over the hexing, too. It seems that whatever you decide to store into this penseive will have a copy sent to another one – presumably one of Mr. Dumbledore’s.” Griphook bared his sharp pointy teeth in disapproval of the headmaster’s trickery.

Hermione clasped a shocked hand to her mouth in disbelief. “That is so wrong!” She gasped.

Harry nodded his head darkly. “Well,” he almost purred, “if he want’s to see what’s in my head, I’m gonna let him!”

Griphook looked at him shrewdly, while Hermione sputtered away “Wait! Harry – you can’t let him on to what you’ve been up to! Harry, don’t!”

But the emerald-eyed wizard held up a hand to calm his friend. “Hermione – don’t worry. He told me a penseive was very useful for organizing one’s thoughts. I’m simply going to place all the bad memories of what I suffered under both the Dursleys and Snape for him to enjoy. And perhaps I’ll add a little something to the mix so he can’t back out until he’s seen it all...” he mused to himself, with an almost evil grin.

Griphook made a noise that was as close to a chuckle as a goblin was going to get. He bowed slightly to Harry and smirked “it sounds like a plan, my student. Remember the finger motion for that hex – poke and twirl. I’ll leave you to your revenge.”

Harry bowed back. “I need to visit the alley soon – could I treat you to lunch my teacher?”

“That would be welcome, Mr. Potter”. With a goblin smile, he apparated away.

“Well, Hermione, if you want to stay, this could take an hour or so. The room is warded for secrecy, silence, and slowing of time, so feel free to grab some of the books in my trunk and make yourself comfy.” Harry picked up his wand and settled down on his bed. Hermione flashed him a smile of gratitude and skipped down the stairs of the trunk and returned with a stack of chosen reading material. He turned his attention back toward the penseive and touched the wand to his temple.

*...a snarling and vicious bulldog, snapping at Harry’s heels and chasing him up a tree in his relative’s back garden. Uncle Vernon laughing cruelly...*

*....Aunt Marge, sitting at the dining room table at Privet Drive, referring to his mother and father’s failings, insinuating he should have been drowned as a ‘pup’....*

*...Vernon, screaming mad because Harry didn't mow the lawn in straight enough lines as a 6 year old, clubbing him across the face several times....*

*....Petunia whipping Harry with a belt for burning the pot roast at age 7...*

*...Harry lying in bed starving, waiting for the can of cold soup to come through the cat flap in his door...*

*....Dudley and his gang beating and pounding Harry in the front garden, Petunia screaming at Harry to stop bleeding on the flowers....*

*...Snape dropping a well-made potion on the dungeon floor when Harry had already cleaned his cauldron, glaring at Harry and daring him to say something...*

*....Snape's brutal bludgeoning of his mind during an occlumency lesson...*

Harry proceeded to pluck memory after memory out of his mind and place them in the swirling silver cloud of the penseive. There could be no doubt now that Dumbledore would see just how 'safe' Privet Drive was for him every summer, or just how 'fair' Snape was. With a nod of satisfaction, Harry added an incantation woven of goblin magic to the penseive, and then looked over at his friend, totally immersed in a book.

*"I've got to hand it to Dumbledore", Harry mused to himself, "my head does feel a lot better without all that negativity in the forefront."*

"Hermione?" Harry gently brought her out of her book. "I'd like to see the rest of the house and visit Buckbeak – want to come?" She nodded, took the books back down to Godric's Suitcase and left them with a longing look. "Hey – keep the one you are reading in your satchel." He called down the stairs. Hermione returned with the favored book looking much happier.

They wandered the house, peeking in a door here and there on the way up to Mrs. Black's former bedroom. That Sirius would allow a gigantic half horse, half eagle (that was not house broken) to live in

his mother's bedroom said a lot of the former relationship between mother and son. Harry slowly opened the door and they both wrinkled their noses in disgust over the stench. After exchanging formal bows with the stately animal, Harry stroked the beast's soft neck feathers and talked to him quietly while Hermione cleaned the room with a series of charms.

"You sure don't look happy, do you boy?" Harry asked the hippogriff sadly. The mighty animal gazed at him with sad yellow eyes. "Hermione, we've got to let him go – look at the way his feathers are drooping. This is slowly killing him."

"But what about the Ministry of Magic?" Hermione looked at the hippogriff sadly. Poor Buckbeak still had a death warrant.

"No prob – you go downstairs and see if Moony is napping – he usually does this time of day." With a nod, the bushy haired witch crept downstairs. "Now for you, my friend" and Harry turned back to the eagle/horse. He closed his eyes and waved his hands over the back of the animal, and opened them a moment later. The result was just what he was looking for – now instead of opalescent gray, the hippogriff was jet black from head to claw.

Hermione returned and raised her eyebrows at the changed beast. "How long will that last?"

"It's permanent – I sort of changed his DNA a bit." Harry grinned. "Now for a temporary disillusionment charm, and we can just let him out the front door in broad daylight." A couple of finger movements, and the hippogriff now changed color to blend into his background, like a huge clawed and beaked chameleon. "Ok, boy, we are going downstairs very quietly. When I open the door, you make your way back to the forbidden forest, or find Hagrid – whichever you want. You are free to do as you wish."

The camouflaged beast nodded his head at Harry and Hermione pondered on just how intelligent it was. The three of them tip-toed down the hall and stairs, straight for the front door. Moony, just as Hermione had said, was stretched out in his chair snoring. The kids grinned at each other, quietly opened the front door and gestured the hippogriff through. It paused long enough to nuzzle Harry and

Hermione in turn, and then walked down the front steps, stretched its wings and took off into the hazy sky of London.

“I hope disillusionment works for air traffic radar” Harry grinned. “They will never understand a low-flying horse.”

Hermione giggled and then looked at Harry. “Well, what now? We spent hours playing with LEGO, released Buckbeak, talked with Sirius and his mum, talked with Griphook about the penseive and booby-trapped said penseive, and it’s only 11 in the morning!”

“Ah” Harry smiled, “welcome to my world! How about we charm my room for time and work on occlumency for you?”

The next 14 hours/10 minutes flew by, with brief interruptions for meals from Winky. Hermione threw herself into it and was a quick student, as always. The hardest part for the both of them was the intimacy of sharing your worst thoughts and memories, but as Hermione philosophically observed, it was better to share them with Harry than Professor Snape.

Harry was mortified at first to be seeing how a girl really thinks. It was very hard to share the glimpses of her past fantasies about Ron, and more recently, interest in him self. Their relationship was never going to be the same. And it had always been extremely difficult for him to open up and share his childhood – something he had kept very closed about his whole life.

“So what was Professor Snape like as a teacher for this?” Hermione asked Harry during a lunch break. They were in Godric’s Suitcase, munching on chicken salad sandwiches and playing with wizard action figures on the table. The jointed Merlin in Hermione’s hand was pointing his tiny wand at a vampire that Harry was holding.

“Ugh – you want to see?” Harry grimaced, setting down the vampire.

“Sure” Hermione looked Harry in the eyes. Although Harry had told her how bad it was, after the gentle goblin techniques she figured he had to be exaggerating to a degree.

Harry took a deep breath, and returning her gaze he shared with her the memory of Snape's 'lessons'. Hermione gasp with pain as she felt the pounding rape of Harry's thoughts after a simple 'prepare your self' was sneered at him with hate. She whimpered along with Harry as he curled up on the floor, head splitting with pain and embarrassment as he had to re-live his worst moments. She shook her head with disbelief after watching Snape insult him for his lack of progress and 'unteachability'.

"Oh Harry – I'm so sorry I ever doubted you" Hermione trembled weakly when the vision ended, tears dripping down her cheeks. "That was awful – he didn't prepare you or even teach you *how* to block him! That was inhuman!"

"You now understand why I have such a hard time trusting him" Harry nodded in agreement. "Really, it's the same way he teaches potions – here's a list of ingredients, figure it out and if it kills you, it's your fault you are so unteachable."

At the end of the week the two had spent a couple months in the suitcase, courtesy of a newly conjured additional bed, Winky's good cooking, Hermione's planner, and the time slowing charms, Hermione was now just as accomplished as Harry in goblin occlumency, thanks to Harry's patient teaching and additional lessons with Griphook. She could now keep her mind blocked at all times, free from the prying of Voldemort, Dumbledore and Snape.

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## Chapter 10

### Sweeter Than Revenge

The rest of Harry's birthday was spent readjusting to the time. Hermione and Harry had spent three months in intense training together, opening their minds to each other in ways that would terrify even the most loving of couples. So besides feeling disoriented to having been only gone a few hours, they had an almost embarrassing closeness that couldn't be denied. Although they never kissed or even spoke of their feelings, they found themselves holding hands and sharing glances, and able to 'read' each other accurately with a swift look.

Hermione found herself in a whirlwind of emotions. She was over Ron easily, having come to the conclusion on her own (before Harry's discovery of her hexed locket) that something wasn't right with her attraction to the red head. Once she learned he had been forcing her feelings through magic, the youngest male Weasley totally repulsed her.

Now Hermione found herself totally in love with Harry. But love was a word that just didn't cover it. There was no cupids and flowers, no snogging and steamy lust. Missing was the head trips, high maintenance, and "I wonder what he's thinking" that she had always associated with a relationship. Through the occlumency they just *were*, if that made sense. She had seen him from his earliest childhood to the present. She had shared his fears, his weaknesses and his endless strengths, and he shared hers. She cried with him, for him, and because of him. He didn't cringe at her mistakes or girly silliness – he accepted her with gratitude, of all things.

Hermione was still in shock at just how impossible Harry's life was. She argued with him a bit about turning in the Dursleys and Umbridge for child abuse, but he was firm. He felt that bitterness and revenge would be wasted energy, seeing that both parties were not in the position to harm a child at the moment. Harry wanted to concentrate on training to defeat Voldemort. Hermione didn't fight or carry on like she would have with Ron – she now had a soul-mate and she

understood. Harry was right – the odious Dursleys and Umbridge would be dealt with later.

Dumbledore. Hermione cringed, recalling how firmly she had always respected her headmaster and professors until she saw them through Harry's eyes. She always had a blind loyalty for authority until now – never questioned her teacher's wishes or that they had their student's best interests at heart. Now she wondered if she'd ever trust again.

The Weasleys were still gone, and it was late afternoon. Harry cooked dinner for the three of them, making sure there was plenty for other order members if they showed up. Tonks came stumbling in through the floo, and the trio greeted her with warm smiles and hot beef stew.

"I think Dumbledore is on his way over" said Tonks, dropping her spoon on the floor by accident. "He came out of his office at Hogwarts looking pretty cheesed off about something."

Hermione glanced over at Harry, who had the faintest of smiles on his lips. A moment later the headmaster stepped out of the fireplace, brushed the ashes off his cloak, and gave Harry a very strange look.

"Harry, my boy, how has your birthday been?" He gave Harry a penetrating look.

*'You can't see me... ha ha'* Harry thought to himself. *'Pretty cheesed off about the penseive I bet.'*

"Fine, Professor!" Harry said innocently. "I've been using your penseive, and you are right – it really does help to move the bad memories to it."

"Um, yes. About the penseive. You do understand the only thing that should enter it are thoughts, correct?" He twitched an eyebrow at Harry, the annoying twinkle gone from his blue eyes. *'I don't see anything unusual in Harry's mind... typical mourning over Black, concern about OWLS, worry about Voldemort...nothing strange.'*

Harry looked down at his feet with a stunning display of acting. “No, I didn’t know that. I might have had some help setting a booby trap, in case Snape wanted to spy on it...”

Dumbledore looked transparently relieved. *‘Ah good – he didn’t set the trap for me, and still doesn’t realize what the penseive does. Help? The twins I bet.’* The twinkle came back to the headmaster’s eyes. “Do be careful what kind of trap you set – it’s not nice to fiddle with people’s minds. And make sure you use it to sort your thoughts about Voldemort – it might help you form a strategy against him.”

The ancient wizard helped himself to a bowl of stew and sat down at the table. “So what are the two of you doing now?”

Hermione smiled “I’ve been going through the library and we’ve been working on our homework.”

“Ah, good” Dumbledore smiled at them and gave them an extra sparkly twinkle of the eyes. “The Weasleys will probably return tomorrow.”

*‘I’ve got to learn how he does that eye-twinkle. It’s so annoying.’* Harry mused to himself.

**0o0o0o0o0o0**

The morning dawned bright and clear. Harry washed and went to the kitchen to start breakfast, to be joined by a yawning Hermione.

“What’s up for today?” She asked him, buttering a scone. “And boy, I hate with a white-hot rage the way the Dursleys treated you, but your scones make the forced cooking almost worth it!”

Harry grinned and tossed her another, knowing that Hermione now knew just how far she could kid him about sensitive things. He liked having an instant soul-mate. It was quite a summer – he got Sirius back in a way, a new dad in the form of Griphook, a new mom in Winky, and he didn’t even have a description for what he could call his relationship with Hermione.

He glanced at the fireplace and door to the kitchen, and did a few charms to make sure the placed wasn't bugged. "I'm hoping I can talk you into covering for me while I make a quick run to Diagon Alley" Harry told her. "I want to talk to a real estate agent about moving the Dursleys. I don't like them, but they have been unfairly dragged into a world they hate, and I don't think Dumbledore is keeping them safe. I want to buy them a nice house, some new furniture, and know that they are out of my life for good."

Hermione stiffened. "I don't think they deserve it, Harry. I don't care how strong of a charm Dumbledore placed on them, they are truly evil to treat a child the way they treated you."

"Well, perhaps" Harry nodded, "but if I let myself think angry, vengeful thoughts I'll end up manipulative like Dumbledore or bitter and cruel like Snape, or megalomaniac like Voldemort. I'd rather just apologize and have them out of my life forever, knowing I did all I could for them."

The girl sniffed softly. "You are a good person, Harry. I'll fluff some pillows under your sheets and tell everyone you are sleeping in. Try not to take too long. Put your planner in your pocket – it will vibrate like a cell phone if I need to get hold of you and write you a message."

"Thanks, Hermione" Harry squeezed her hand and apparated out of the room with a smile after swiftly donning his 'Edward Evans' look.

**OoOoOoOoO**

Harry located the store he needed quickly – 'Matilda Malkin, Real Estate for Wizards and Muggles' the sign read above the store front. He entered the small office to see a bored looking secretary working through a stack of parchments glance up at him, apathy rolling off her in waves.

"Can I help you?" She droned in a monotone.

"Er, yes, I need to buy a muggle home for my relatives." Harry said, glancing over some photos of homes spellotaped to the walls.

“Let me get the agent” the secretary said in her nasally dull voice, as she left the room.

A smartly dressed witch entered the room, wearing an outfit that looked professional in both muggle and wizard communities. “Can I help you, sir?” she spoke, gesturing him into her back office. “I’m Matilda Malkin.”

“Yes” Harry spoke, looking around. “I wish to relocate my muggle relatives, and buy them a house, but I want to know how secure I can make the transaction.” The woman raised an eyebrow questioningly. “I don’t want people in the wizard world to be able to find the new home easily, if that makes sense.”

She smiled at Harry knowingly. “In these times that is a common request for muggle-born witches and wizards. Not to worry. Tell me the area and price range you are looking, and we can see a few properties and have them moved in a matter of hours, unseen. We stake our reputation on our discretion.”

Harry breathes a sigh of relief. Once he gave a price, the witch sat even straighter, called for tea and was even more accommodating. They looked through some books, and Harry immediately zeroed in on a very nice home in a quite exclusive neighborhood. It was twice the size and twice the cost of Privet Drive, so Harry felt confident the Dursleys would like it. “Can we see this one?” he asked.

“Certainly, dear” she said, and made a quick floo call. “It’s available – we can floo right over and check it out.” They both grabbed a handful of the green powder and traveled to the empty house.

Harry walked around quickly. It was well kept and snobby enough to have his Aunt and Uncle swooning with delight. He signed the paperwork to buy the house and have the cost taken from his account, choosing a date and time for closing, and schedule the goblins to ward the property.

Harry then took his leave of Matilda Malkin after grabbing a sales brochure and photos of the home, and apparated to Privet Drive. It was Saturday, so his Aunt, and Uncle, sitting in the parlor watching the telly, Dudley obviously away at Smeltings. They turned around at

the sound of his appearing in the kitchen, with a less-than-pleased look on their faces.

“What are you back here for, boy?” his uncle growled at him. “Did the freaks throw you out?”

“Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon” he nodded at them. “No, actually I came to say good bye for good. But also to do you a big favor, so please hear me out.”

“If you are leaving, you are already doing us a huge favor” his uncle spat nastily.

Harry looked at him coldly. Why did they have to make it so hard? But he took a deep breath and spoke calmly. “Please just keep quiet a few minutes, then I’ll answer questions and I can be out of your life for good. I want to be away from here even more than you want me gone. I do not believe you are safe here,” and Harry saw Petunia gasp and sit even more stiffly than before, “and I feel badly about you being dragged into my world. I learned this summer that Dumbledore has been playing with all of us all these years. My parents had left a will – they never wanted me to come here. In fact they specifically named four other families to care for me and to NOT leave me with you, respecting your dislike of my world.”

His aunt and uncle kept their comments to themselves at least. They stared at him, giving him full attention for once. “Well, what about the blood safety?” His aunt asked.

“One big huge lie, courtesy of my ‘dear’ headmaster, Harry continued. He also charmed that vase” Harry pointed at the blue vase against the wall, “to re-enforce feelings of dislike toward me. You might have noticed in the last couple of weeks you haven’t been feeling as aggressive around me, and you hadn’t swung at me once while I was here since I blocked the hex.”

The three of them had varying expressions of guilt, surprise, and skepticism passing over their faces. “Why would he do that, boy?” his uncle exclaimed loudly.

“I’d prefer ‘Harry’ or even ‘Potter’, if you don’t mind.” Harry gave his uncle a dirty look. “Dumbledore did it to make himself a hero in my eyes, so I’d feel like he was my savior every fall to rescue me from this hell.”

His aunt and uncle really looked guilty now.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “you aren’t safe here. Voldemort will find you, and I’m sure Dumbledore doesn’t care as long as I’m not here. So here,” he tossed them the photos of the home he just bought “I got you this. It’s paid in full, title in your name, closing next week. It’s a really nice neighborhood. I’m having it warded so it’s invisible to the magic world, and I’ll leave you with a £10,000 gift card to buy whatever you need to fix it up to your liking. On the day of closing, pack nothing! For your safety you don’t want *anyone* to know you are moving! No suitcases, nothing! The agent will come and pick you up in her car and take you to your new home, and send house-elves to move your stuff magically within hours.”

His family sat dumfounded, staring at Harry and the photos of the gorgeous home. “But what about our friends?” his aunt gasped.

‘*What friends?*’ Harry thought to himself. But he smiled kindly instead and said “once you have moved you can call anyone you wish over the phone and give them your new address. Your new phone will not be tapped like this one is. Your mail will be forwarded for two years magically to your new home. After two years Voldemort and Dumbledore will have given up trying to find you – sooner if I win this war quickly. I’ll put your home on the market, and the profit will go into your account on the sale. My agent will handle it for security reasons – I’m not making a dime out of anything.”

“Can we see the house?” His Aunt asked, with more kindness in her voice than he had ever heard. “It looks very nice. I’m very familiar with this neighborhood”. Vernon grunted a sound that was a strange blend of greed, skepticism, and almost gratitude.

“Yes, here’s the card of the agent – she has a muggle phone too. I went under the name Edward Evans. She will be glad to answer any questions. My only requests are that you please leave my real name out of this, and leave the fireplace open and don’t board it up. It is *not*

open to the floo network, but I have the ability to hook it up temporarily if I feel you are in danger. It will be a quick way to get to you in an emergency if you are in trouble. I am safe – I only suggest this for your own good.”

They nodded dumbly at Harry. He looked at his ‘family’. *‘This is it,’* he thought to himself, *‘I’m finally leaving them forever.’*

“Well, sorry you got dragged into this. And I’m really sorry that all Dudley ever saw of the wizarding world was negative. There are many nice people and cool things in my world. I wish you guys could have been nicer to me, but I don’t want any harm to come to you.”

And with that, Harry apparated out of Privet Drive for the very last time.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

Harry appeared in Godric’s Suitcase. He peeked through the window in the door that viewed the bedroom in Grimmauld place before entering the room, and removed his charmed disguise. It would not be good to step out of a trunk with Ron sitting there. He waved at Sirius and Mrs. Black, gave Winky a kiss on her wrinkly forehead, to her surprised delight, and walked upstairs.

Harry stretched and ruffled his hair a bit more, and made his bed. It was only 11:30, and hopefully nobody knew he was gone. He walked out of the room, attempting to look like he just woke up, and made his way to the kitchen where Moony and Hermione were drinking tea and reading books and newspapers.

“Morning, sleepyhead!” Remus smiled at him. “I figured since Molly was still gone I’d let you get some rest.”

“Thanks!” Harry forced a yawn. “Any tea?” He sat down and helped himself to a cold scone.

“What are your plans for today, Harry?” Remus asked him, putting down the paper.

Harry looked over at his parent's friend – the last of the Marauders. "Moony, may I ask a very personal favor of you?" He felt himself sweat a bit. The young werewolf nodded at him solemnly, and Harry continued. "Would you be offended if I asked to look into your thoughts? I promise not to go too deep or far back, but for my personal safety I need to be sure..."

Remus glanced around the room, and Harry rubbed his Potter ring to look for magical 'bugs', which came up negative. "You can do that?" he leaned forward and whispered at Harry, who nodded at him. "Go ahead – I trust you completely."

Harry looked his friend directly in the eyes and gently probed around. Sure enough, Sirius was right – Mooney had been suspicious of Dumbledore for some time. He totally trusted Harry, and held strong feelings of loyalty, love and trust for him. He held Hermione, the twins, and Tonks in the same regard, but held reservations about most of the Weasleys and Snape.

Harry broke off the contact, and smiled. "Did you...?" Remus asked – he hadn't felt anything. Not even Dumbledore was that smooth, in his opinion.

"Yes" Harry whispered back. "Please follow me, Moony". They started up the stairs towards Harry's room, but knocked first on Hermione's door and gestured to her. "Hermione" Harry asked her in a low voice, "could you please keep an ear out for anyone? I'm taking Moony to Godric's Suitcase." She nodded, grabbed a book and headed down to the parlor by the front door and hallway.

He led his former professor into Ron and his' bedroom, and swiftly charmed the room for privacy, silence and slowing of time. Remus' eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Well" he coughed, "I can't wait to hear this – occlumency, legilimency, wandless magic... what else?"

The young wizard laughed and popped open his trunk instead of answering. Remus smiled at the stairs and followed him down willingly. He looked around the room appreciatively, and gave a small cry of delight when he spied Sirius' portrait over the fireplace. "Sirius my friend! Um, is that Mrs. Black?"

“Mr. Lupin”, Mrs. Black nodded with politeness. She curtsied formally to Harry with a polite “My Lord” and turned back to Remus. “Please excuse my former behavior. I had no control over my actions. I deeply regret the things I was forced to say – I have no problem with my son’s best friend being, um, different.” She looked at Sirius. “How did you put it son – ‘furry little problem’?”

Remus nodded politely back. “I had wondered why it was so quiet, and didn’t dare peek under your curtains. It’s a pleasure to meet you in your current state, Mrs. Black.” He turned to Harry and questioned him “my Lord?”

“Um – yeah. I’m Lord Harry James Potter-Black now. Long story.” Harry rolled his eyes.

With that out of the way, Harry summoned Winky and Dobby, who provided a hearty lunch and he proceeded to fill in Remus as to the summer’s events. The werewolf was delighted and relieved to learn what had been happening in Harry’s life.

“I was seriously worried about you, but afraid to put anymore burdens on you, with the weight of the prophecy and all” he told Harry sadly. Sirius and I, about a month before the Ministry of Magic (and he winced slightly when saying it), started to put two and two together, and had agreed to keep an eye on Dumbledore. It was hard to keep him out of my thoughts – I had to really lay on the ‘sickly werewolf’ act and pretend to doze a lot.”

Harry’s head snapped up. “You know the prophecy – the *full* prophecy?” He asked, thunderstruck.

Remus looked at him solemnly. “Harry – I think most of the order knows it. I think Dumbledore *wants* it leaked out to Voldemort. I don’t know if Dumbledore really believes you are the one who can defeat the Dark Lord. I get the feeling he either wants you to kill him, and then take the credit for it him self, or he wants you to be cannon fodder while he does the job. Dumbledore is powerful, no doubt. I imagine his goal is to take over the wizard world, and the popularity of the public is the way he is going to do it.”

Harry scowled darkly out his enchanted windows. "Why didn't he take over as Minister when he defeated Grindlewald?" he asked. "Why drag me into this – it isn't even a true prophecy – we only have his word for it, and I have a much more reliable one from the goblins. One that doesn't include my having to 'kill or be killed'."

Remus rubbed his jaw in a familiar pondering expression. "It could be Dumbledore knows of the true prophecy then, and wants to keep you away from it – make his more popular if you will. He glanced over at Sirius and changed subjects. "So we have the twins, Hermione, myself, the goblins and probably the house-elves. Who else are aware of what is going on?"

"Well" Harry blushed, "I'm hoping you will speak to Tonks. I tried to take a short polite reading off of everyone at the party, but I had to back out of her head in a real quick hurry." He looked at his feet, turning redder by the moment.

"Do you know if you can trust her completely, Harry?" Remus looked concerned. "What did you see?"

"Well, um, er..." Harry stammered, "She's *real* loyal to you, Moony. I think you should, um, ask her out. And yes, I think she's suspicious of Dumbledore too, but I didn't stick around in her head." And he left it at that, and was please to see Remus also blushing, but looking very happy about the news.

Lupin reached over and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'll take care of Tonks – I'll ask her out on a date where we can't be overheard. And Harry, I'm really sorry about Ron and Ginny. That has to be real hard on you. Betrayal is a bitter thing that takes a long time to get over. I don't know if I'll ever get over Peter's betrayal of us."

Harry nodded with understanding. "Yah – you do know how I feel. I appreciate being able to dump on you."

Remus suddenly thought of something, and looked over at the fireplace. "Mrs. Black? Is there any chance I could convince you to go back to your portrait and pretend to still be cursed? If Dumbledore finds you missing or sane, he will probably suspect that Harry came into his inheritance and is on to him. We really aren't ready to deal

with that yet. If that offends you, we could get a blank canvas for you to live in and keep you here, if you can tell us how to remove your old one.

Mrs. Black smiled at the two men looking at her, and Sirius rubbed his hands together with glee. "Oh I think I'd enjoy being 'crazy' again very much. As long as you good people know it's all an act, I have some real choice things I can say to Mr. Dumbledore in particular. I'd be glad to help out." Everyone nodded with satisfaction.

They finished up a pleasant meeting with Harry lending Remus his invisibility cloak and Firebolt for a private date with Tonks. "Just let me know how it goes as far as her loyalties to Dumbledore is – that *all* I want to know!" And the werewolf politely offered to bite him on the next full moon.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0**

The Weasleys returned that afternoon. Ron stepped out of the fireplace with a very smug, almost Malfoy-ish look to his face.

"It's great we finally have a home to be proud of" he sniffed, brushing soot off his robes. "Sirius really was a great guy."

"*Boy, that was insensitive*" Harry scowled slightly at Ron. Hermione looked shocked and gave him a punch on the arm.

"Ron, try to be a bit more tactful" she snapped, and Ron's mother shot her son a scathing look.

"Harry, I'm sorry again about Sirius. He did leave us a generous amount that he refused to take back, and insisted that we move." The plump witch sighed. "I will miss the Burrow – this new home just isn't, well, *home* yet, if you know what I mean. I can't wait for you both to see it."

"No problem Mrs. Weasley" Harry said, and headed up the stairs. Mrs. Black must of overheard the callous comments from Ron, because as soon as he stepped foot in the hallway, she started her old shrieking. It was all he could do to bite back a smirk.

The two boys flopped on their beds. "So tell me what you can about the new place – just don't let anything out that could compromise its location" Harry asked kindly. Although he wanted nothing to do with Ron, and really didn't want to be in the same room as him, he had to put on a good act.

The red head rolled onto his back and laced his fingers in back of his head, grinning. "Well, we don't have money like you, Harry, but this is sweet. It's much larger than this house, nice new furniture, and a real garden. Very peaceful, more formal, but room enough for Quidditch." Ron looked very content.

Harry frowned a bit. "Ron, I might have money, but I don't think I've ever thrown it in your face."

"Well, no, I guess. But you have no idea what it's like to have hand-me-down clothes, and furniture, and books and robes." Ron glared at the ceiling. "I just wasn't meant to live like that."

Hermione had followed the boys into their room and was leaning against the door way. "Ron, how can you say that? Harry never had clothes except for those awful cast offs of Dudley's, and no toys of his own. Everything he ever had before Hogwarts was hand-me-downs. Even his family." She shot him a bitter look and flounced out of the room.

"Mental, that one" Ron rolled his eyes. "Girls never understand."

*"Neither do I, mate. Neither do I"* Harry thought glumly. Changing the subject, he asked "got your OWLS yet?".

"Nope" he answered. "How 'bout a game of chess?"

Harry gave the game some effort, as he tried to continue with friendly conversation. "So what's happening with Percy?" He asked softly.

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "Percy is still Percy. Prat. Still not talking to the family. Mum doesn't fly off the handle like she use to, but they are still upset anytime his name comes up."

After brutally beating Harry at chess, Ron stood up and stretched. "I'm heading to the kitchen for a snack." And he left without a backwards glance.

Harry listened to be sure he was indeed in the kitchen, and quietly knocked on Hermione's door. She cracked it open, and broke into a wide smile when she saw who it was, and gestured him in.

"Where's Ginny?" he asked, glancing around. Hermione shrugged. "I think she's with the twins." Harry grinned and swiftly charmed the room for silence, repelling, and time slowing.

"What are we doing?" she asked, eyeing him with curiosity.

"Visiting your folks." Harry grinned, grabbed her hand, and apparated them out of the house.

They landed in the Granger's living room, Hermione stumbling for balance on arrival. "Next time WARN me first!" she yelled at him. Her parents, sitting on the sofa watching the telly, jumped up in alarm.

"Please forgive me, Mr. And Mrs. Granger!" Harry smiled as smoothly as he could while dodging Hermione's blows on his arms. "We need to talk about some things, and we don't have long to do it."

Although surprised and shaken, the dentists quickly composed themselves and gestured the two to take seats, after quickly hugging their daughter.

Harry swiftly outlined the course of events happening with Dumbledore and the approaching danger with the war. "What I'm getting around to saying, is, well, I don't feel that you are safe here. I am very well off, and I wish to relocate you somewhere until the war is over. Where ever you wish. And don't worry – Hermione can come visit anytime – even during school with the new skills I've been learning."

Her folks looked understandably stunned, and Hermione yelped at him again. "Next time give me warning about THAT too!" and proceeded to pummel him some more.

Mr. Granger stammered slightly and glanced at his wife. "This actually isn't too great of a shock to us – we have been considering options already. Please give us a couple days and come back – around the same time, and I think we will have something worked out."

"Unless you feel the danger is immediate" broke in Mrs. Granger, looking at them worriedly.

"There is no way of telling," Harry said, "but that should be fine – we will come back in two days." He took Hermione's hand again and apparated back to her room, removing the spells.

"Never a dull moment" she smiled at Harry. "And Harry – thanks for being concerned about my folks" she whispered, and gave his hand a warm squeeze.

They wandered the house a bit, Harry looking for Remus. He found him in his favorite chair in the parlor. They sat down and Harry asked in a low voice "Moony – where can I get armor and a second wand?"

His former teacher raised a customary eyebrow. "What kind of armor?"

"Dragonhide – to go under robes." Harry answered, watching the door for eavesdroppers.

"Sirius liked Almardo's Armory in Hogsmeade, Merlin Lane" Remus answered in a low voice. "What kind of wand are you looking for?"

"Something the Ministry and Dumbledore won't find out about" Harry replied.

"Knockturn Alley, small shop on the west side of the street, sign in window says 'Lepani's'. Ask for Leonard, tell him I sent you." Remus gave him a smile. "And I never had this conversation."

"What conversation?" Harry asked innocently, nodded his thanks, and left with Hermione for the kitchen.

Ron, who was finishing what was obviously his second slice of pie, looked up when they entered the room. "What's up?" he mumbled around a mouthful of pastry.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Nothing – it's boring I'm afraid. Too bad we just got here. It's going to be a long holiday."

"Not for me" Ron gloated. "I'm heading back home in a bit. Lots more unpacking to do and I can't stand being cooped up like this."

Mrs. Weasley swatted her son in the back of his head. "Try to have some manners, Ronnie." She scowled at him. "Sorry, kids, but I do need Ron's help at the new place. I'll return him in a day or two."

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next day dawned hot and sunny. Harry and Hermione found themselves alone with Remus in the house, who kindly agreed to cover for them while they went shopping. Disguising them with goblin magic, Harry took Hermione's hand and apparated them to Hogsmeade. After a quick trip into Honeydukes for a gift for Remus, they found Almadors with no trouble.

Harry purchased a set of dragonhide armor for each of them. Hermione protested vehemently at first – the armor was very expensive, and she had her own inheritance from Sirius. But Harry was firm – when his close friends were in additional danger because of their relationship with him, he wanted to provide additional protection wherever possible. With that in mind, he had two sets pre-paid for the twins, who would be notified by owl that an anonymous benefactor had gifted them.

Dragonhide was highly spell-resistant (which was why the dragon challenge of the tri-wizard tournament was so, well, *challenging*), lightweight and strong. Different species of dragon held no advantage over others, except for looks. Each set consisted of vest, arm guards, shin guards and boots. Hermione chose Common Welsh Green for herself, and Harry picked Hungarian Horntail for his own – not for looks, but for a sense of revenge on the one particular dragon from the tournament.

They left the store content with their purchases, and left permission for Winky to come and pick them up next week. Next they apparated to Knockturn Alley. Hermione glanced around nervously as they passed the dodgy looking shops and dodgier looking patrons, but Harry was intent on finding Lepani's. They finally found it – a tiny shop practically hidden, with dusty books and knick-knacks in the single window display. Harry took a deep breath, pushed open the door and entered, Hermione in tow.

The inside of the shop was as dusty and uninviting as the window display. Hermione tried to interest herself in some books, but found herself repulsed by the condition of the place and the darkness of the subjects in the tomes. An ancient bent wizard was sitting behind a wooden counter, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Can I help you?" he wheezed, in a not-extremely helpful sounding voice.

"Yes" Harry returned the suspicious look, "I'm looking for Leonard. Remus sent me". The wizard was possibly even older than Dumbledore – bent and fragile, with hundreds of lines on his face, and deep pouches of skin under his eyes. There was no friendly twinkle in the pale blue eyes, but as Harry figured that Dumbledore's twinkle was a fake accessory, that didn't bother the boy.

"Remus?" The crabbed figure raised his long, bushy eyebrows. "Remus Lupin? How do you know him?"

"He's a very close friend" Harry answered. How did Remus know this guy?

Keeping his eyes on the two teens, the wizard picked up a cane, hobbled to the front door, locked it and flipped the sign to 'closed' after glancing up and down the street. He shuffled back to the counter and gestured to the kids to follow him to the back room, which the two did with a sense of trepidation.

Once they passed through the beaded curtain to the back room, even Harry gasped with surprised. Not only were Hermione and his disguises stripped off of them, the ancient wizard was now a middle-aged man the same age as Remus, who stood in front of them

smiling with amusement. "I have the whole shop outside enchanted to keep my identity secret, and this doorway negates that charm or any other disguising enchantments. I am impressed with your ability with charms, Mr. Potter. I'd never of recognized you in a hundred years! Now what can I do for you?" He politely gestured the youths to sit on a sofa in front of his fireplace in what was a very clean and pleasant parlor.

Harry took a quick reading on Leonard's mind. He picked up only good and light – the only darkness in the man seemed to be a wish or need to keep his identity secret, and a strong distrust for the Ministry.

"Now, as Remus sent you to me, and I know the close relationship you have with him as Mr. Potter, I am assuming you are looking for a second wand. Why not go to Ollivander's – I imagine your primary wand is from him?" Leonard served tea from a content looking house-elf's delivery, while chatting.

"We need wands that can't be traced by either the Ministry or Dumbledore. They both are trying to keep me from my task for various reasons" Harry said cautiously. "I can't divulge more than that, but I can assure you I am working for the light, as I sense you are."

Leonard looked at him appraisingly. "Yes, Mr. Potter, I do. I stay in hiding for many reasons, but I am a wizard of the light, and wish to see the downfall of He Who Must Not Be Named. I will not ask what your task is – I sense it is something great, and probably something to do with the Dark Lord?"

Harry nodded. "That is another problem I have. I can not use this wand" and he pulled it out from his cloak, "against Voldemort."

The wizard picked up Harry's wand and examined it. "I can feel it is Holly with Phoenix tail core. Why can't you use it against the Dark Lord? It feels in excellent condition – it's very content with you. Why not go to Ollivander's for a second wand?"

"Content?" Hermione asked. "Wands have feelings?"

"Yes, ma'm" Leonard smiled at her. "A well made wand is almost a sentient magical being. Oh, they won't talk to you" he laughed at her

look of skepticism, “but a wand crafted with talent and treated with respect will grow stronger and more in tune with its owner as the years go on.”

Harry fidgeted, debating how much to trust Leonard. “Leonard, I can’t say a whole lot, not knowing you, but I can tell you this much. I know for a fact that Ollivander informs the Ministry and Dumbledore when underage persons buy a wand, and gives them the particulars. I have been attacked many times in the past six years, and have almost been expelled and even jailed for protecting myself. The Ministry doesn’t like my popularity – I don’t either – but they try to discredit me to make them selves look better. I wish to be able to defend myself. I have battled Voldemort five times now, but unfortunately our wands share brother cores.”

Leonard’s eyes widened. “Ah – that explains a lot. That is a problem. If you turn out to be ‘the Chosen One’ that can be a real serious ‘fly in the potion’. Tell me, Mr. Potter – have you ever had a custom wand?”

“No sir – only Ollivander’s. I didn’t know there was such a thing.” Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Ah!” Leonard rubbed his hands together with glee. “I accept the task of creating custom wands for the two of you. You are in for a treat!” He stood up and spun around, gathering leather cases and boxes from around his room, chatting while he went. “You see, most wand makers create wands from supplies they gather or purchase. The better the maker, the better his ability to create the wand that ‘wants’ to be made from that particular piece of material, and the better the match to the proper core. Not every wand is a perfect creation in that method, but it’s adequate. And naturally, the biggest challenge is then to pair the witch or wizard with the proper wand. The wand does indeed choose the wizard, but you have to keep thousands of wands in stock to assure proper matches for a community.” The wizard stacked boxes on the coffee table between the sofa Harry and Hermione were sitting on and his own chair, and refreshed their tea. “With custom wandmaking, the individual materials for the wand body and core choose the witch or wizard, and the wand maker then has to have the skill to shape them properly. The result is a wand that truly is more bonded and powerful for its owner.”

Leonard opened a box and shook it teasingly. "This is full of unfinished wand bodies, or blanks. I'd like you two to feel inside, but keep your eyes closed. I don't want you seduced by the look of the material – just look for one that feels right in your hand. You will know when you grasp it.

Harry and Hermione looked around the room, feeling through the box. It was hard not to giggle, and it was fun. Some of the stick-like pieces were rough, some smooth, some cold and slick like glass. There was certainly more materials than wood in the box. When Harry picked up one heavy smooth stick, Leonard was right – he just knew it was the one for him. "I've got it" he said with surprise. "This one wants me!" Hermione shot him an annoyed look and kept rummaging.

Leonard looked pleased. "Pull it out and hold on to it" he said.

A short while later Hermione said with a gasp "wow – this one! You're right – this one for certain!"

They compared their new wand body blanks. "Yours is bloodstone, Mr. Potter. A strong, dense gemstone from Africa, it embodies strength, victory over enemies, loyalty and sacrifice. A very understandable match." Harry stroked the long, cool rod of stone. It was deep green with flecks and spots of blood red. He felt an immediate attraction to it.

Hermione looked at hers. It seemed to be ivory, a natural spiral horn of some sort. She lovingly stroked the tapered form, amazed at the warmth and affection she felt for it and from it. "Is this from a unicorn?"

"That, my dear," Leonard explained with a smile, "is a narwhal horn. They are secretive deep sea creatures – mysterious and strong. That is a wand that will not be shaped, except for customizing the length for you."

He put the lid back on the box of blanks and moved it to the floor, bringing up another large leather box. Pulling off the lid, he tilted it toward them so they could see a box filled with what looked like opaque white glass balls, the size of pool balls. "In these globes are the cores for wands. Ollivander mostly uses only wood and three

kinds of cores for his wands. Being a custom wandmaker, I have a large variety of materials, many of which I've inherited from generations of custom wand makers. Hold your wand blank in your right hand, and feel through the box with your left until one of these spheres feels good to you."

This time the selection was much quicker. Although every one of the glass-like globes looked and felt the same, they were swiftly drawn to a particular one for each of them. When the proper ball was held, the sphere felt warm and magical, and the wand blank in their other hand tingled with response.

Leonard took the ball from Hermione and cracked it open like an egg. "Very interesting, my dear! You have mermaid hair in yours. And this is from Princess Almagoria, who led the merpeople in the 1800's. That's quite an honor to be chosen by this. Do you have the water people in your ancestry?"

Hermione looked startled but pleased. "No sir – I'm muggleborn" she stammered.

"Yes, but how many generations back?" Leonard asked her. "Never mind – most muggleborn witches and wizards have plenty of magic folk in their ancestry, but magic folk who chose to live as muggles for one reason or another, so the magic was kept secret." He cracked open Harry's next. Leonard gasped when looking at core. "This, sir, is hair from the tail of Godric Gryffindor's own griffon familiar. This is quite an honor to be chosen by this as well. You two are both destined for noble and worthy quests.

He shut the box and brought up a final container, again filled with globes, but smaller – the size of a walnut. "These are various gems for the tips of the wands. Not every wandmaker uses them, and in fact you might not find one for your wand – not every wand wants one. A gem will focus the energy better in some spell casting. Keep the wand body and core in your right hand, and feel through."

Hermione ended up with a glistening baroque pearl, so pure it was translucent. "That's no shock there" laughed Leonard. Harry bonded with a white sapphire. "Again, this is no surprise for me. Although it

looks clear like a diamond, it doesn't have the 'fire', so it gives a sharper focus, if you will. This will be a wand for a warrior, Mr. Potter."

Harry paid for the wands with a promise to send his house elf to check on them in a few weeks time, and visit when he could. With a message to give Remus his regards, Leonard shook hands with the two and waved goodbye.

## Chapter 11

### Chatting and Popping

Life settled into a routine over the next two weeks for Harry. Grimmauld Place was sometimes boring, sometimes bustling with activity from order members. Harry and Hermione visited her parents, who were pleased to announce they were closing the house and shop for two years, taking their dental staff and leaving on an extended trip to South America to help the indigenous people with charity work. It was a tearful goodbye for Hermione, knowing she wouldn't see her parents for two years, but Harry gave them the birthday present Hermione had given him so they could communicate instantly from anywhere.

Hermione was almost upset, until Harry promised her she would take house-elf magic lessons with him, and they would be able to communicate telepathically and not need the journals. "That's one way to get another birthday gift out of me, Harry. Now I have to find you something else!" she grinned.

The promise of elf lessons did a lot to appease her hunger for learning. She had left Harry a depressed wreck of a boy only a month ago at the end of school, and now she was bonded with a young man of strength and power who willingly shared his new found talents with her! And although Hermione excelled in the goblin occlumency and concealment charms, she had absolutely zero aptitude for the wandless conjuring and transfiguration. The bushy haired one had to admit – she wasn't use to being anything but the quickest, best, and brightest. This was tough.

Harry and Griphook were excellent teachers – patient, instructive, and knowledgeable. However, it seemed that many wizards and witches were just too used to their wands, and dependant on them, and she was one of them. Harry, on the other hand, had an affinity for all people of all backgrounds and species, and could just emphasize so well with Griphook, he 'got it', and mastered the wandless magic immediately.

Their relationship helped her bruised ego. She truly understood that Harry needed her, and could care less if she didn't excel in something.

He valued her, Hermione, as a friend and person more than Hermione the homework helper.

Remus returned from his date with Tonks, looking young and glowing. He reported happily that Tonks was now one of their small number of trustworthy friends, so Harry added a hand on his pocket watch with her face on it. Moony was also pleased to report that Tonks, indeed, was happy to be on a date with him, as he was with her.

Harry and Hermione took frequent visits to Godric's Suitcase and started elf magic lessons with Winky and sometimes Dobby. Thanks to the goblin time stretching enchantments, they would be able to get intensive training in a short time. The first lesson was communication with other house-elves, or individuals of choice.

Winky explained her lessons patiently. "Kind masters, we elves can communicate with all elves, and you will be able to also. But I can not teach you how to talk with all wizards – I don't understand the way human minds work, you see. But as you two are already bonded through goblin magic, you will be able to mind-speak with each other. Now hold my hands and listen to me call for Dobby."

Hermione and Harry were in Winky's mind in a flash. They heard her distinctly call out "*Dobby – are you busy?*" And just as distinctly heard Dobby's voice come back "*just kneading dough, Winky. Do you need me?*" Winky answered "*Yes please – come to the Master's trunk. I is giving them lessons.*"

Instantly Dobby appeared with the elf 'pop', hands covered with dough, clothes dusted with flour. He bowed to Harry and Hermione with a flourish. "How can I help Harry Potter and his Grangey?"

Winky spoke solemnly. "Goblins can sometimes mind-speak with their mates. Wizards who do occlumency can sometimes, but it is" Winky winced, "mean feeling. Only elves have learned to talk with all elves, and we don't care where they is. Goblins and wizards can't talk into trunk, see?"

Hermione's eyes lit up with understanding. "You mean only elves have learned to cross dimensions – this trunk is another dimension! Wow!"

“Yes, mistress” Winky nodded, pleased with the quick way her masters learned. “Now, listen to Dobby call for help from any house-elf”, and the four of them held hands.

Harry could hear Dobby calling *“this is Dobby, house-elf to the great Harry Potter. Winky and I is teaching Harry Potter and his friend elf-magic to help defeat You-Know-Who. Can someone come and help us with this lesson?”*

A strange elf voice echoed in their heads *“this is Fuzzy, house-elf to the house of Grizzlebeard. I be right there.”*

With a pop an unknown elf appeared before them. He bowed low to Harry and Hermione. “How may I be of assistance?”

“Hello, Fuzzy,” Harry greeted the elf. “Thanks for helping. May we ask you some questions?”

“As long as it will not compromise or endanger my master, I would be honored, sir” the elf answered.

Harry looked at the three elves. “I take it all house-elves heard your message, Dobby?”

Dobby nodded “all house-elves in England, Harry Potter Sir. Elves could call to other countries, I guess. We don’t bother because we don’t need to.”

Harry frowned slightly. “Dobby – what would prevent, say, Malfoy’s new house-elves from hearing and reporting on us to Voldemort?” Hermione snapped her head up with fear and concern.

The rotund Fuzzy nodded at them. “They heard, Chosen One. But they will not report. House-elves serve the Chosen One. The Chosen One will lead us to a better future – where we can serve our beloved masters in more safety. Harry bowed formally to Fuzzy, pondering what the elf said.

“Wow!” Hermione yipped. “That’s amazing! Now why did you, Fuzzy, answer Dobby’s call, and not anyone else?”

Fuzzy smiled. "Many of us were probably about to answer, miss. I just was quicker. My master is out of the house at the moment, and I need something to do. House-elves like to be kept busy."

"How did you know where to find us?" Harry asked, and Hermione nodded.

"We follow the voice, sir. Listen and I'll call my wife Fluffy – watch for the magic now. It is faint colored, but you can see it when you look for it." He held Hermione and Harry's hands and called in his mind *"Fluffy? I would like you to come and meet some wizards if you aren't too busy."*

A female elf's voice answered *"I'm coming, Fuzzy."*, and as the exchange was going on, Harry could see a thin, glowing thread connecting the formless voice to them.

Pop! A female house-elf stood before them and curtsied. Winky thanked Fluffy and Fuzzy, who again bowed and popped away. The rest of the 'day' in the trunk was spent by Hermione and Harry learning to call and speak to elves themselves, and how to apparate to them, no matter where they were. That and quite a few extended LEGO breaks...

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry was sitting at the kitchen table one morning finishing tea with Remus and Dumbledore, when Snape flooded in. He glared at Harry, who politely ignored the look, and nodded at the headmaster. "You wished to speak to me?" the potions master asked him.

"Ah, yes my boy" Dumbledore's eyes sparkled. "I need to ask something of you and Harry."

Harry's head whipped around to face the potion's master, who looked as uncomfortably caught off guard as Harry was. Remus looked up and watched with interest.

"I need the two of you to resume the occlumency lessons, Severus. It is paramount that Harry learns to block his mind from Voldemort". He gave his most winning grandfatherly smile at the two of them, which

Harry tried to innocently react to. It was hard when the house was fairly empty to keep up the pretense of not knowing Dumbledore for what he really was – a manipulative, self-serving, egotistical creature.

Snape sneered at Harry. “Perhaps I can test him right now to see how well he has practiced this summer?” Dumbledore nodded his approval and without time to prepare, Harry was assaulted by the greasy-haired professor, who flashed his wand at him with the dreaded cry of “Legimens!”

It was only his many years of spying as a double-agent that allowed Snape to keep his face from showing his shock. Before Hogwarts ended for the term, Harry’s mind had been an open book, practically screaming his thoughts to all but the most inexperienced of Occlumens. But when he tried to batter his usual way into Harry’s head, he was stopped against a brick wall of secrecy. Harry gulped and tried to look like he was being read, while at the same time searching Snape’s thoughts, unknown by the potion’s master.

*“What has this boy been learning? I can’t get in! He’s stronger than even Dumbledore! He didn’t learn this from me!”* was racing through Snape’s thoughts. Deeper, though, was what Harry was looking for – a deep suspicion and distrust of Dumbledore, and a sincere hatred of Voldemort. Snape was fighting for the light after all. There was no question he hated Harry – deeply and sincerely loathed him in fact – but Snape was to be trusted. Harry did the only thing he could do, and sent him a message back.

Snape was continuing to batter around in Harry’s mind, looking for access to the boy’s thoughts, when he was surprised to hear Harry speaking to him in his head, in an extremely polite and respectful tone: *“Please professor – do not let Dumbledore know about this. Pretend I have failed again – I will explain when we return to school, I promise.”*

Snape broke off the contact and sneered again. “It is what I expected – perhaps he practiced some, but there is remarkably little improvement. Do you want me to start tutoring squibs next?”

“Oi – he’s good” Harry thought dryly to himself, trying to look sufficiently exhausted and embarrassed, and shoot Snape some typical dirty looks.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Please you two – try to get along. We *are* on the same team. Please continue when classes start with your ‘remedial potions’.” The elderly wizard stood up, twinkling away, and strode to the fireplace to floo back to the castle.

Snape gave Harry a meaningful look, but minus the usual hostility, then spun on his heels and followed Dumbledore out of Grimmauld Place.

“*Did you catch that, Hermione?*” Harry asked her telepathically.

“Yes – hope you don’t mind me eavesdropping. I’m not as good as you at probing, but I was able to ‘tag along’. So Professor Snape is ok. I’m simply amazed at how much he hates you though – something isn’t right with that.” O0oI0o0o0o0o0o

One hot afternoon Harry and Hermione were lying in the boy’s bedroom, on separate beds studying the books Harry had bought from Diagon Alley. It was a pleasant day, Ron and Ginny were at the new Weasley home, and the house was quiet. A large brown owl flew in the window and dropped a letter on Harry’s book.

“Hello, handsome boy. Whose owl are you?” Harry stroked the owl’s soft chest while Hermione reached for the owl treats. “Oh – it’s from Neville!” The owl took off again and Harry opened the letter and read out loud.

*Dear Harry,*

*I’m really glad you wrote. Please stop beating your self up over the Ministry of Magic – we followed willingly and would do so again. My Gran is so proud of me, she went right out and bought me my own wand, and has been telling everyone about my fight with the death eaters. Harry – I can’t tell you how much easier magic is with a wand that chooses you!*

*I'm sorry for the loss of your godfather. I don't know a lot about him, but you must have been very close by the look on your face afterwards.*

*It's an honor to fight with you – if the opportunity comes again, I will be by your side, and you will not stop me.*

*Neville.*

Harry smiled. "That's not the same boy as first year!" he laughed. "Neville is a great guy – we need to get closer to him and Luna." Hermione nodded in agreement, as Harry sat down to the desk and pulled out parchment for a return letter.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO**

The twins popped through the floo one morning, as Harry and Hermione were working on the last of their homework at the kitchen table.

"Morning, young Harry!" Chirped George

"How's tricks, Hermione?" asked Fred with a wink.

Harry grinned at Hermione and sent a house-elf telepathic message to George. *"Hey George – can you hear this?"*

*"Why Fred!"* George answered in his mind *"look who's on the Weasley network!"*

*"It's no longer all Weasley all the time!"* agreed Fred.

Harry was so shocked he sputtered out loud "Wait! You guys have always talked telepathically?"

Fred and George smirked at the two and put a finger to his lips.

*"How else do we always..."* Fred said,

*"...Finish each other's sentences?"* George concluded.

*"Where did you learn house-elf telepathy?"* Hermione joined in.

*"Is that what you call it?"* George asked.

*"We've always done it – just us, though. You two are the first we've met who can do it too. Where did you learn it?"* Fred asked.

*"House-elves – who else"* Harry smirked

*"This will be dead useful!"* George chortled, gave them a thumbs-up and left the kitchen with Fred.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0**

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, sat back in his desk chair, idly sucking a lemon drop and stroking his phoenix, Fawkes. Something was different about Harry Potter, something intangible that he couldn't put his finger on. He had asked Severus if he had noticed anything in Harry's thoughts, but was answered with the potion master's typical sneer and snide comments.

He wished he had more time to spend at headquarters, but with school starting soon, trying to find a new DADA professor, and order happenings, it just wasn't feasible. Every time he saw the boy, he would gently pry into his mind, but would see exactly what he expected to see – grief over his godfather's death (*"glad to be rid of that meddler, too"*), lingering guilt and sorrow over Cedric Diggory, concern for his friends, worry over his OWLS, fear of the Dursleys – typical for Harry.

He acted as expected, thought as expected, and nobody was giving him strange looks. What was different about the Boy-Who-Lived?

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0**

Harry was sitting in the parlor one morning, and was surprised to see a beautiful white bird tapping on the window. It wasn't an owl by any stretch of the imagination, but as it certainly wasn't a bird from the British Isles, he felt positive it was at least magical and let it in.

The creature was a bit larger than a starling, with blinding white plumage, and jet black eyes and beak, which was long and pointed. Its wings were long and pointed too, rather like a sea bird. It was a beautiful, delicate bird, with an air of gentleness about it.

Remus Lupin looked up from his book. "Oh – a fairy tern" he said. "They come from the tropics. Wonder whose it is?"

"Luna's" said Harry, removing its letter and glancing at it. He stroked the pretty creature's feathers and handed it a cup of water to sip from.

Remus rolled his eyes and smiled. "That girl doesn't do anything normally, does she?" Harry smiled in friendly agreement. He liked Luna. Bidding the bird farewell, he sat down and opened her letter.

*Dear Harry*

*As it is the roving skunkber's mating season, this will have to be shorter than I'd like. I'm sorry about Sirius – I knew he was innocent. You could feel it. I'm glad I went with you – I'm fine and there is nothing to apologize for.*

*Harry, I know Hermione doesn't care for me very much. She is very literal, and I see things from my own world. It doesn't matter – I like her. I feel that she, Neville, you and I are going to become very close friends this year. Watch out for Ron – he doesn't feel right.*

*I'll be seeing you soon. Maybe the four of us can share a compartment on the express?*

*Luna*

"What's a roving skunkber?" Harry asked out loud.

"Something that only Luna can see, I'd imagine" Remus said with a fond chuckle.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry and Hermione were in Godric's Suitcase, listening to Winky and Dobby explain about popping.

“You can already goblin travel, master, so popping will be easy. It’s a little nosier, but you can go anywhere. I’m going to hold your hand, and we will appear in Hogwarts.” She held Hermione and Harry’s hands, and with a ‘pop’ they appeared in the kitchen, surrounded by smiling and bowing elves.

“This didn’t trigger any wards or anything?” Hermione asked, glancing around nervously. A couple beaming house-elves brought over tea and biscuits, and reassured her. Five years of worshipping ‘Hogwarts- A History’ down the drain.

“Don’t worry, mistress. There are no portraits in the kitchen – the headmaster can not see you here.”

Harry looked at the elves, and then at Winky and Dobby who just popped in. “Portraits? And you guys know about the headmaster being a little, er, ...”

“Untrustworthy?” A skinny elf sighed. “We are loyal to Hogwarts. We are grateful to the Boy-Who-Lived, who made our lives better 15 years ago. We serve the Chosen One, who will lead us into a new age. We obey the headmaster, whoever he is, unless it will hurt you, Chosen One, or one of your companions.”

It was a solemn speech for a house-elf, and Harry stood up and bowed to the elf in return, which brought the room of elves to tears. Another elf, elderly looking with a nose like a small button mushroom spoke up.

“Beware the portraits in the castle, master and mistress. They are under the command of the headmaster, and they keep watch under his orders.”

“Wow” Hermione’s head was spinning. “I’m going to get as paranoid as Professor Moody.” Harry smiled in agreement. It was going to feel great to give Dumbledore a piece of his mind when this was over.

Winky tugged gently at the kid’s sleeves. “Now, kind masters. You felt my magic when we came here – I made it ‘loud’ for you.” Harry and Hermione nodded. “I want you to pop up to the room of requirements.

That way you can see how it works within warded places and other dimensions”.

“OK” Harry took a deep breath, and visualized what Winky’s magic felt like. He heard the ‘pop’ before he felt it, opened his eyes, and he was in the room of requirements. Hermione popped in, followed by Winky and Dobby.

“It’s different from goblin apparating” mused Harry. “Faster, more accurate, but louder.”

“Yes, master” Winky nodded in agreement.

Harry looked around the room of requirements. There was no door or windows, but other than that it looked like any other unused room in the castle – full of discarded furniture and junk. There were a couple abandoned student trunks, a broken bed frame from one of the dorms, stacks of books with missing covers or spoiled with spilled ink. “What’s all this?” he asked Winky.

She shrugged. “It’s the room of requirements when there is no requirement. I don’t know where this stuff first came from, but as people seldom see it like this, no one has ever bothered to empty it according to the other elves.”

“Just as long as there are no portraits here” Hermione shuddered.

Dobby spoke up. “Harry Potter, sir, I’m going to pop to a new location. I want you to send me a message, then follow my voice and pop to where I am”. The elf then disappeared.

Harry reached out with his thoughts. “*Dobby – where are you, my friend?*”

“*The great Harry Potter calls me friend!*” Harry could hear the tears of joy, and see the fine golden thread to trace. He popped, following the elfin aura, and found he was on a lovely mountain top, far in the wilderness. Looking down, he realized he could see the lake and Hogwarts below.

“Very good, Harry Potter sir!” Dobby gushed “*Now you, Miss Grangey*”.

Hermione popped in next to them and looked around. “This is amazing Dobby” she spoke with deep appreciation.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoO**

Harry woke up late in the night – or was it early in the morning. It was dark and quiet in the house, except for the extremely loud snoring coming from Ron’s bed. If they were at Hogwarts he would simply charm his curtains for silence. He sighed and let his thoughts wander.

He sat bolt upright with a sudden revelation. If he could talk telepathically with the elves and apparate to their location, then he now had a sure-fire way to know where Voldemort was at any given time! Wards wouldn’t matter, location was unimportant!

Harry lay back down with a wicked grin. Time to bug old Tom. He closed his eyes, and felt the connection with the evil wizard they shared through his scar. There it was – he was now looking through Riddle’s eyes, hearing his thoughts, and thanks to his goblin skills, Voldemort was completely unaware he was being spied on.

*“You found where Potter’s family use to live, but they moved? BAH! CRUCIO!”* Wormtail was hit with the Cruciatus curse, and twitched, screaming, on the floor. *“Curse that Dumbledore – he somehow learned we found them, and moved them. They are probably out of the country by now.”*

Harry saw it – a blood red thread leading to the evil wizard. He followed it with a grin and popped into Voldemort’s throne room, facing him with his arms crossed, a cheeky smile on his face. The room was empty except for Voldemort and the still twitching Wormtail on the floor. Harry flipped the stunned wizard a rather rude finger gesture and apparated to the kitchen at Hogwarts, and then back to Grimmauld Place, in his bed.

He laced his fingers in back of his head, lying on his back with a contented grin. If there was any chance Voldemort had the power to trace him, it would just lead him to Hogwarts, which Tom did not have

the ability to apparate to. He opened the 'spy link' to Voldemort's thoughts, and spent the next hour biting back giggles and laughter, as he listened in to the panic he caused by his little appearance.

**OoOoOoOoO**

Ron, Harry and Hermione were sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast when Professor McGonagall flooded in and handed them a stack of Hogwarts's envelopes.

"OWLS! They screamed in unison, and the adults in the room crowded near to see the results.

Harry tore his open, glancing briefly at Hermione and Ron, wondering if his face as pale as theirs.

### **Ordinary Wizing Level Results**

Pass Grades Fail Grades

Outstanding (O) Poor (P) Exceeds Expectations (E) Dreadful (D)  
Acceptable (A) Troll (T)

***Harry James Potter has achieved:***

*Astronomy...A*

*Care of Magical Creatures...E*

*Charms...E*

*Defense Against the Dark Arts...O*

*Divination...P*

*Herbology...E*

*History of Magic...D*

*Potions...E*

*Transfiguration...E*

Hermione naturally had 10 outstanding, and Ron had none. Harry was annoyed about not getting an 'O' for Potions – that would end his chance for becoming an auror, but he wasn't sure if it was his goal any more.

Professor McGonagall spoke kindly to Harry. "If you are still interested in becoming an auror, Mr. Potter, I'm sure we can challenge your score in potions."

Harry smiled at his house head with gratitude. "I'm not sure about being an auror, Professor, but I do want to take potions, if you don't think it will cause too many problems." He opened the next sheet of paper with his book and supply list and glanced over them.

The professor nodded at him and left through the fireplace.

"What are you taking next year besides potions, Harry?" Hermione looked over at the list he was scribbling to himself.

"Hmmmmm" Harry nibbled the end of his quill, which was quite devoid of fluffy bits. "Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, Defense, Herbology, and I think I'm going to take up Runes."

"What about Care of Magical Creatures?" she asked softly, eyes full of worry.

"Arrrggh!" Ron groaned. "Sod Hagrid. I mean I like him, but his class is a waste of time! I don't want to watch anymore skrewts or flobberworms – know what I mean?"

Hermione and Harry stiffened a bit. "I don't want to hurt Hagrid" Harry answered slowly, "but Ron is right. I don't see how feeding flobberworms is going to help me as an auror or any other career. I'll visit him as soon as we get to Hogwarts and let him know. Are you taking it, Hermione?"

"No – I'll come with you. I'll bring a present for him so his feelings won't be hurt." She shook her head remorsefully. "I'll be taking the same subjects as you, plus Arithmancy, Astronomy, and History. What about you, Ron?" She tried to sound interested and friendly.

The redhead gave a shrug. "I'll worry about it later." With that he got up from the table, grabbed a cookie off the counter and headed out of the room.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Molly decided to take Ron and Ginny to Diagon Alley the next day, to purchase their school supplies. The adults all agreed it was too dangerous for Harry to go out, so Mrs. Weasley kindly agreed to pick up his books and things. Hermione, feeling bad for Harry and knowing they could always go out in disguise, volunteered to stay with him.

Grimmauld Place was empty, except for Remus and the elves. Harry called Dobby to make sure Dumbledore was at Hogwarts, and asked him to enlist the elves to keep him at the school for the day. He asked Winky to pick up their new armor at Hogsmeade, grabbed his satchel and gestured at Hermione.

"Where are we going?" she asked him as they transfigured their appearances.

"I want to get our wands. I don't think we should be gone too long – that could be asking for trouble, but when we get back we can work on catching up on potions. I know you don't need it, but I need to study hard to 'de-Snape' my potion skills." Harry smiled. Hermione nodded in agreement, and they apparated to Knockturn Alley.

Lepani's was empty of customers, and Leonard looked up with a smile. Harry smiled back, marveling that the bent and ancient ruin of a wizard was really a young man, just wonderfully illusioned. He gestured them around the counter, and they entered his parlor, choosing comfortable seats by the fireplace.

"It's good to see you both" Leonard said warmly, bringing four boxes out from an end table. "I'm glad you are here in person so I can see your reactions to your new wands. He handed a long leather covered box to each of them, and waited for the revelation with a tangible air of expectancy.

Harry and Hermione smiled at each other, and with an exaggerated flourish, Harry lifted the lid on his box. The sight of the custom wand made him gasp – it was a work of art. Where he had always loved and cherished his original Ollivander's wand, it was like comparing an off-the-rack suit with a custom tailor-made suit. Or maybe the difference between a production line velvet painting and a master's painting. Both are hand crafted, but one is just that far beyond the other.

The wand was long, slender, and wonderfully carved from the solid rod of green and red stone. It was smooth and cool to the touch, but felt like it almost quivered with power. The very end of wand was finished with a long faceted clear gem – the white sapphire, and the balance as Harry held it was superb. It felt in his hand like an extension of his arm, like it belonged. *"This is going to feel like flying on my firebolt instead of a school broom..."* Harry mused to himself.

Hermione had also opened her box, and was swooning with love over her new wand. The narwhal horn was shortened a bit from when she saw it last, polished and shining. The tip was capped with the beautiful pearl, which was mounted in a way that it almost flowed as one piece. It was attached with a decorative gold bezel, with gold wire gently wrapping down the spiral of the horn and ending with a decorative cap on the end. It was feminine and all together lovely. She caressed the wand like a kitten and cooed.

Leonard smiled with pleasure. "You first, Mr. Potter. Please do a *Lumos* with your new wand." Harry did the familiar flick and spoke the incantation, and was astounded to have light pouring out of his new wand that lit up the whole room like a stadium floodlight. The three of them winced and shielded their eyes with their hands until Harry flicked the spell off.

"Wow" was all Harry would say.

"Now you, Miss Granger. Please levitate this cushion" and Leonard gestured to a soft pillow on the sofa next to him.

Hermione hesitated a second, and then grinned. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" she cried, swishing and flicking her wand at the cushion, which promptly rocketed off the couch with such force, it smashed

against the ceiling and exploded in a cloud of feathers and fabric confetti. Hermione just sat there with her mouth gaping open, her eyes shooting between the floating feathers and the wand cradled in her hands.

“As you can see, these wands are far, far more efficient at channeling your magic. I would practice with them a lot before using them in place of your old ones. And you might not want to use these at school – it might bring questions you don’t want to answer.” Leonard had a pleased, smug look on his face, but he had earned the pride he felt.

Harry and Hermione mutely nodded, feeling almost afraid of the power they could now focus with these new wands.

“Now, I’ve made a couple presents for you both, as I felt they could be helpful in your upcoming, ah, task, shall I say?” Leonard handed them each a smaller leather box, which they took with questioning looks.

Harry’s contained a short 9” wand made from a ¼” rod of bloodstone, capped with a simple milky looking crystal. It was unadorned, slightly tapered, and didn’t radiate the power of his other new wand. Hermione’s was the same size and shape, tipped with the same cloudy gem, but made out of what appeared to be bone. They looked at Leonard questioningly.

He smiled at their confusion. “These are dueling wands. They are a back up wand only. Although the cores and blanks are close to a perfect match, they are not – just a good match. The biggest difference is the focusing stone on the tips – its calcite, which is double refractive.”

“Huh?” Harry asked, and noticed that Hermione looked just as puzzled as he felt.

Leonard smiled and picked up an uncut cube shaped crystal from his table, along with a square-cut clear gem. “Look through these two stones to the print on the parchment beneath them.” They looked and saw that the clear stone showed the letters sharp and focused, but the cloudy cube gave a slightly blurred double image.

“Double refractive – splits everything” Leonard smiled, searching their faces for understanding.

“Oh!” Hermione gasped with realization. “Will these wands split a spell cast with them?”

“Very good, Miss Granger!” The artisan smiled approvingly. “These wands will divide any spell cast with them. It’s very handy in a battle to cast two hexes or curses at once. But keep in mind that it’s harder to aim – spells tend to ‘home in’ a bit, but it’s still a little wild, and each divided spell is weaker than one that hasn’t been split. I recommend that people keep these dueling wands strapped to their weaker arm or a leg, and learn to use it with your weaker hand. It’s always an excellent idea to learn to use a wand with either hand, but using these left handed and your primary wand right handed can be deadly in battle.”

“How cool is that?” Harry breathed reverently, caressing his two new wands. Hermione nodded in mute agreement.

“Here’s your last little extras and then it’s off with you” Leonard smiled and tossed them each a bundle. They each caught their respective gift and looked at them. They each had a pair of dragonhide wand holsters made for the arms.

“Thanks, Leonard. These primary wands are works of art, and the dueling wands and holsters could very well save our lives.” Harry snapped his head up suddenly, a thought crossing his mind. “Can I ask a favor of you?”

Leonard nodded, waiting for Harry to continue.

“I will probably have a couple more friends who would really benefit from your skills. Can I bring them for custom wands too?”

“Certainly, Mr. Potter. I am honored by your trust and pleasure in my craft.”

With handshakes all around, Harry and Hermione apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

On returning to the ‘most ancient and noble house of Black’, Harry and Hermione grabbed Remus and brought him down to Godric’s Suitcase, slowing down time yet again. They showed him their new wands that the werewolf examined with appreciation, and tried on their new dragonhide armor that Winky had delivered and left on the table.

After a lovely lunch with Winky, Remus asked them “What’s next on the schedule? Oh, and by the way, would you know what happened to Buckbeak?”

“Buckbeak?” Harry asked as innocently as he could.

“You do know that werewolves have heightened senses, Harry, don’t you? We can smell fear.” Remus smiled dangerously at him.

“Oh Moony – you know how he was pining. He’s safe – I promise. I permanently charmed his feathers and fur to a new color, disillusioned him long enough for him to leave, and told him to go wherever he wanted.” Harry looked at the floor sort of guiltily.

“Well, I’m glad for one” Sirius spoke up from the portrait. “You know how much I hated being cooped up. It was murder for that poor guy.”

“Just so I know he’s ok, and that it’s yet something else I need to keep secret” Remus rolled his eyes, but grinned just the same. “Now, what’s next on your agenda?”

“Potions, Mooney. I need to work on catching up on potions to make sure Snape doesn’t have any excuse to fail me. He knows something is up with my occlumency skills, and he’s going to be steamed about me getting into advanced potions, and I can’t say I totally blame him. But he’s been an awful teacher, and I want to use my old books and some new ones I have to truly understand *what* I’m doing when I make a potion – why certain ingredients work together and how. Snape’s ‘lessons’ for lack of a better word, have been just recipes copied from the blackboard and done with no help or explanations.”

Hermione nodded. "I got good grades, but I'd really appreciate time at a cauldron with theory in mind."

"Well, I'm no where near the talented potions person that Professor Snape is, and not a master in any stretch of the imagination, but I daresay I had a better teacher when I was at Hogwarts. I would be happy to assist you in some catch-up." Remus smiled at their enthusiasm.

The rest of the summer passed with the three of them hiding out in Godric's Suitcase anytime they could get away for an hour or so. Thanks to the time slowing charms, Hermione and Harry found themselves with a strong foundation in the hows and whys of potion brewing, with excellent skills to match. Their LEGO building skills were growing in leaps and bounds too.

## Chapter 12

### Back to School

Harry dragged his trunk onto the Hogwarts Express, charming it for featherweight as soon as he was out of Mr. & Mrs. Weasley's sight. He carried it into an empty compartment and hoisted it up on the shelf, placing Hedwig's cage on the seat, and leaned out the window, waving at Remus.

Sitting down with a sigh of contentment, he waited for his friends to join him. Eventually the compartment was filled with Luna, Neville, Hermione, Ron and Ginny. It was cozy, to say the least, but Hermione and Ron had to leave for prefect duties. The four remaining students traded stories of their summer while playing exploding snap.

"Where's Trevor, Neville?" Harry asked, noticing the boy's toad was missing.

Neville gave a guilty grin. "I convinced my Gran he would be more helpful keeping my garden free of pests. I'm hoping to pick an owl up on Hogsmeade weekend."

After another round of cards, the compartment door flung open to reveal the yearly intimidation visit from Malfoy and his two favorite goons, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Well, look here – it's the room of losers" Draco sniffed, while his buddies chortled like a couple of mindless puppets. "They will allow *anyone* to attend Hogwarts, won't they?"

Harry probed his thoughts. He would have looked into Crabbe and Goyle, but was scared of being bored to death. "*Stupid Potter and his pals – think they are so great. Dumbledore's little brownnosers – well, I'll show them. I can't wait to bring Potter to the Dark Lord...*" Harry could see the memory of when Draco accepted the dark mark from Voldemort.

Harry leaned back in his seat with a bored look on his face and crossed his arms casually. "Look Malfoy, do us all a favor. Just leave. You know what is going to happen next –the same thing that happens

every time we are on this train. You insult us, we tell you to sod off. You get nasty; we beat the snot out of you. Why not save us time and beat your heads against that wall over there so we can get back to our game?"

The young Malfoy turned red with rage, as the four friends all laughed. Harry could pick up Ginny's thoughts clearly "*wow he's hot when he's all cool like that...*" He winced slightly – he had to shake her off and quickly before the year got any older.

Draco, to no ones surprise, whipped out his wand and aimed it at Harry, but before he could open his mouth, Harry casually gestured with his empty hand and slammed the three out of the compartment and shut the door. They staggered to their feet, dumb struck for a moment, then pulled the door back open with fury. Luna, Neville and Ginny looked a bit worried, and reached for their wands, but they didn't need them. Harry once more did some gestures, never changing his relaxed position in his seat, and caused the three Slytherin wands to fly into his hand.

"Now go away" Harry said firmly, with a meaningful glare. "I'll give these back to you when we get off the train if you are good little boys." Once more Harry blew them out of the compartment with a slight movement of his hand and shut the door.

Everyone's voices broke out at once. "How did you do that, Harry? When did you learn wandless magic?" While they were all peppering him with understandable questions, Harry gently probed the three's minds. Luna and Neville were what he was hoping to see – loyal friends and fighters for the light. Ginny was plotting how fast she could get to Dumbledore's office and tell him of Harry's exploits.

Harry laughed. "Muggle magician trick" he grinned and showed him his wand in his left hand, down at his side. He didn't bother to mention that he never used the wand. Luna gave him a strange look, but didn't say anything. Ginny was disappointed she had nothing to crow to Dumbledore about.

The witch with the pastry cart came by, and Harry treated everyone to chocolate frogs and caldron cakes. As they settled down with full bellies, Ginny leaned against Harry and started to doze. As soon as

she was truly asleep, Harry cast a silence charm around her, and spoke to Neville and Luna.

He kept it brief, but let them know that he wanted to do some additional training with them, and that they were not to trust Dumbledore, Ginny, or Ron. Luna gazed at him, a tad off-focus, and asked “Harry, when did you learn wandless and soundless magic?”

Neville gaped at Luna and then Harry. “That’s right – even if it was a ‘muggle trick’, you didn’t say anything!”

Harry shrugged. “I will tell you soon – just not here. As long as Ginny thinks nothing is up, please accept that for now.”

They agreed and he took the silencing charm off of Ginny.

*“Harry, what did you do to Malfoy and his goons?”* Hermione’s voice came through his head. Harry grinned and sent her back the memory, and he could feel her shaking with the giggles. Giggles were cute when Hermione did them, he realized.

They finished the journey without anymore surprises. Harry got to call out a cheery “Hello Hagrid!” to his half-giant friend as he headed toward an empty coach with his friends. Before boarding, Malfoy, hating every moment, forced himself to come forward and ask for their wands back.

Harry eyed him aggressively, and spat at him in a low voice so only the two of them could hear. “Malfoy, if you want to be a git and take the dark mark, it’s your funeral. You bother my friends and me at your own expense. You are a weak, spoiled, pampered little brat and no match for us.” He tossed him the wands, which Draco snatched with venom.

“You won’t be so arrogant soon, Potter. I owe you for this, and I owe you for putting my father in Azkaban”. He glared daggers at Harry.

Harry just laughed and turned his back on Malfoy, putting his foot on the carriage step. “Malfoy – your dad put himself there when he accepted the dark mark. I’m sure you will be keeping him company soon” and he entered the coach without a backwards glance.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The Gryffindors sat down together, waving sadly to Luna as she headed off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron seemed more than delighted to sit closer to Dean and Seamus, and Harry felt more than a little relief at it. The first years marched into the Great Room, looking scared and nervous as Professor McGonagall led them to the sorting hat.

“They do make them smaller each year, don’t they?” the Gryffindor table chanted in unison. But everyone stopped staring at the tiny, frightened first years when the hat broke into song.

*Welcome, all you first years’*

*I do not bite or sting*

*I am the Hogwarts sorting hat*

*I only sort and sing*

*I was charmed one thousand years ago*

*By the founders four*

*They wanted me to find your houses*

*For forming friendships, nothing more*

*Godric Gryffindor was a knight*

*Of courage brave and bold*

*But he was not reckless as some say*

*Nor stupid as some told*

*Fair Rowena Ravenclaw*

*Loved to ponder and to read*

*Her brains were tempered with deep love*

*And reflected in each deed  
Salazar Slytherin was cunning  
Ambition is not necessarily bad  
He shunned the dark and fought for right  
He was not an evil lad  
Helga Hufflepuff was loyal and true  
But it sickens me to hear  
Folks say she takes the 'leftovers'  
For truth, that's no where near  
What I'm saying, my good students  
Is a fact for which I'll fight  
The four founders were good wizards  
Who ALL fought for the light  
The dark road is a dangerous path  
Beware when for power you might thirst  
For leaders of the dark will always  
Use you for their needs first  
So again I give you my warning  
And a plea for all to hear  
We must band together  
For the battle's drawing near*

*You will know the war is at hand*

*And the chance to choose sides has adjourned*

*When Hogwarts founders have come back to us*

*Hogwart's founders have returned*

The last note had not died away when the hall broke out in excited whisperings and mutterings. Harry looked up at the head table and noticed Dumbledore's face was shocked and even angry looking. He had never looked anything more than amused with the hat's past songs.

Ron was looking hungrily at his empty plate, while Hermione spoke with Harry in a low voice "the founders? Back? How?"

"I don't know, Hermione" Harry whispered back, "and I'm surprised about Slytherin – we've always assumed he was an evil git."

"I'm not, Harry" Hermione sniffed. "If he was evil, he would never have been accepted by the other three."

Dumbledore called the hall to silence and the annual sorting of the first years began. Once the hat finished with the twenty-odd eleven year olds, Dumbledore stood up, who appeared to have recovered from the hat's sorting song, and beckoned the crowd with open arms to dine. And, as usual, the tables filled to groaning with all manner of delicious foods and beverages. The grateful hungry students tucked in.

When the last of the desserts disappeared, the tables were once more magically clean, and the room all drowsy from too much food and exhaustion, Dumbledore once again stood up and the room fell silent.

"Just a couple reminders and it's off to bed. First years, please note that the forest on Hogwarts grounds is forbidden. That's why it's named the Forbidden Forest and not the 'Welcome All Students Forest'."

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker (and the dirty, glowering man standing by the doors nodded when the headmaster gestured to him) has asked me to remind everyone that no magic is to be done in the halls between classes, and the list of forbidden items in Hogwarts is posted on his office door. It includes anything from Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes.”

“Quidditch tryouts are the second week of the term. Please see your head of house or Madam Hooch if interested.”

The headmaster cleared his throat noisily and the room quieted once more. “I’d also like to announce the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Professor Alistair Moody – the real one this time.” With that, the real Mad-Eye stood up for a quick bow and sat down again, eyeing the crowd with his usual suspicion.

“Can he see into Godric’s Suitcase?” Hermione whispered to Harry, who shrugged his shoulders with concern. “This could put a fly in the potion.”

Harry looked around the room. Students from 3rd year and older were all looking rather nervously at the new DADA teacher with the swirling magical eye. Everyone knew how Barty Crouch Jr. had spent the year as the defense teacher, polyjuiced to look like Mad Eye so he could kidnap Harry and bring back Voldemort. Dumbledore should have known it was an imposter – Mad Eye was supposedly one of his closest friends and Dumbledore was a master Occlumens. It was pretty tacky to bring back such a vivid reminder of the whole awful year.

With a sad sigh he turned back to Hermione and spoke in a low voice “I’m sure we can find a spell that will give false reading as to the contents of my trunk – just like you can implant false memories in a person.”

With that announcement the first years were led to their new dorms by the prefects, and the older students followed behind at a more leisurely pace.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Schedules were handed out the next morning during breakfast. Harry, thoughtfully munching on a warm scone, was almost pleased to see Monday start off with potions with the Slytherins. Ron grumbled loudly, but Harry was actually looking forward to showing off his newly learned skills, and to having a talk with the taciturn professor.

Since classes didn't start for a few days, Harry and Hermione set off for Hagrid's to break the news to him. Dobby popped in and met them half way to the giant's hut. "Harry Potter, sir? I have some news" the elf squeaked with excitement, twisting the edge of his Weasley sweater in a knot.

They stopped and Harry kneeled to elf-height. "What is it, Dobby?" he asked the twitching creature.

"Mr. Malfoy is planning something – something bad for Harry Potter!" the elf whispered. He gazed at Harry with huge, adoring eyes. "Dobby was cleaning the Slytherin common room late one night, and could hear former master plotting with his two ugly friends."

"Crabbe and Goyle?" Hermione asked with concern.

"Yes, Miss Grangey. Former master was boasting he got bad, dark magic book this summer. He has studied it hard. He is going to use new hex on Harry Potter!" Large tears were leaking down the elf's face.

"Great work, Dobby. I'll watch my back. If you can, without being hurt or caught, see if Malfoy has that book in his trunk for me. Let me know if you hear anything else." Harry patted the elf on his back and shook his hand. Dobby looked at his hand and at Harry with embarrassing waves of worship, nodded, and popped away.

Harry and Hermione continued down the slope. The sun was warm and the dew mostly gone from the grass as they set down toward the half-giant's stone hut. Hagrid was sitting on the front step, repairing a large bear trap that the two youths felt certain wasn't for trapping bears.

He looked up and waved “Harry! Hermione! Good to see yer!” and set down his trap, brushing his hands on his heavy canvas trousers. “Come in for a cup ‘o tea.”

They settled down in Hagrid’s hut, a bit nervously, watching him fuss with his kettle as they patted the excited drooling boar hound Fang. He brought a plate of his now-legendary rock cakes, as Harry liked to call them, to the rustic table with three mugs of steaming tea. “Tell me about your classes now” he smiled warmly at them.

Harry and Hermione both looked down. Finally, Harry broke the ice. “Hagrid, we wanted to tell you in person. It’s not that we don’t like you – you know we’re your friends, but “

Hagrid cut him off. “Harry, I got my list of students – I know the two of yer ain’t taking my class. I’m touched yer came to see me and tell me like adults. My feelings would have been hurt if yer hadn’t.” He patted their arms, which thankfully didn’t break any bones, and sat back contentedly sipping his tea.

Hermione jumped up and hugged him with grateful relief. “We were so worried about hurting you, Hagrid. But as interesting as magical creatures are, we need to concentrate on our future careers, and didn’t have room for it.”

“Now where is Ron? I see he didn’t sign up either. Its strange ter see yer both without him!” Hagrid looked out the window facing the castle and sat back down.

Harry fidgeted a bit. “I don’t know, Hagrid. Ron has changed this summer. He inherited a good bit of money from Sirius’ will, and its gone straight to his head. He’s not hanging around with us much anymore.”

The giant raised a bushy eyebrow, but didn’t say anything in response. So they spent a pleasant couple of hours with small chit chat and catching up on what was happening with the centaurs and other creatures of the Forbidden Forest, before saying their good byes and promises to return the next weekend.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

The potions dungeon was as cold and uninviting as ever. Harry sat down between Hermione and Neville, with Ron shooting them all dirty looks as he found a seat with Dean and Seamus. Professor Snape strode into the room, robes billowing out behind him, shooting dirty looks at the Gryffindors. *"Please find an excuse to give me private detention, Sir"* Harry sent to Snape's mind when the teacher looked at him. A raised eyebrow was all he received in recognition, but Harry felt certain he got the message.

The dark eyed professor gladly complied, to Harry's amusement. After 15 minutes of lecture, he chose to start pop-quizzing the emerald-eyed Gryffindor, who was able to answer correctly, without hesitation, every question. With a customary sneer of disgust, Snape accused Harry of obviously cheating somehow, and awarded him detention, to the delight of the Slytherins.

Harry ate dinner swiftly, ignoring Ron's looks of dislike. It was almost like having Malfoy at the table eating with them, Harry mused to himself. At least Harry didn't give the table a shower of half chewed food while he ate. Hermione looked at Harry with concern.

"Starting off the year with a bang, Harry? I'm sure Professor Snape knew you had simply been studying."

Harry smiled at her. "No worries" he whispered at her, "I asked him to give me detention. I want to see where he's coming from. I've got a strong feeling his hatred of me isn't natural, and I'm going to find the source." Harry glanced over and saw Ron giving him scathing looks. "I think your boyfriend is jealous" he told Hermione.

Hermione looked down, blushing furiously. "He's *not* my boyfriend" she whispered back angrily. With a rather strong punch to his arm, she pushed Harry off to his detention.

Harry walked in the dungeon room door to find Snape looking up from a stack of parchments, glaring at him. "Shut the door" he growled at the boy.

With the door shut Harry asked in a low voice "Professor, can we be overheard?" to which the greasy haired man moved his head to signal no, eyeing him with interest.

Harry swiftly cast charms for privacy around the room, and charms for finding enchanted objects. Sure enough, the blackboard and Snape's desk both glowed sickly red. The potion's professor's face barely betrayed his amazement, but he kept himself taciturn. "Has the Golden Boy given up on wands now?" he asked with a less than heartfelt sneer. "And what is with the red aura, Potter?"

Harry quickly contained the cursed objects within the protective blue auras of Goblin magic. "This spell will contain the curse, sir, without the person who cast it knowing it's been blocked. The spell was a constant reinforcement of negative feelings toward me. You might not notice, but you are less patient with me in this room than anywhere else. The Slytherins tend to be their most aggressive in this classroom too."

Snape shook his head a few times, like clearing it. "You are right, Potter. I do feel an immediate difference. But don't think I'm going to start asking for your autograph." He growled darkly.

Harry looked at the potions professor seriously. There was many times over his years at Hogwarts he had found himself within seconds of cursing this man. Hours were spent complaining about his unfair treatment of him. But Harry knew Snape wasn't his enemy – Dumbledore was the one causing the enmity. He took a deep breath, thinking back to the previous year when Snape threw him out of his office and stopped their occlumency lessons when he caught Harry looking into his pensieve. "First of all Professor, please allow me to apologize for last year. I had no right to look into your pensieve. Honestly, I thought you were trying to kill me, and wanted to see if I could find something on you. When I saw it was an old memory about my parents, well, I wanted to see them. But I had no right to invade your privacy. I'm not proud of the way my father treated you – frankly I'm embarrassed and humiliated that my dad was such a bully. You've seen my memories – you know how bullies have treated me. The only people I ever told about your pensieve were Remus and Sirius, and that was just to ask them how my dad could be so awful. You have my word that no one else will ever hear about it."

Harry took another deep breath, watching Snape's face. The potions master gazed at him with an unreadable expression. "Continue" he said, but in a far less hostile voice.

"Are you aware of how Dumbledore has been manipulating my life?" he asked Snape softly.

"I have suspicions, nothing more" Snape answered back, marveling at the skill with which his rival's child was blocking his metal probing.

He sat down on the edge of a table facing his teacher. "I found out this summer that he refused to honor my parent's will. I was absolutely never to go to the Dursleys. You've seen my worst memories – they are not fabricated, as you know. I've suffered a childhood of abuse and neglect, with Dumbledore's full knowledge. He charmed a vase in their parlor with the same curse as your blackboard and desk."

Images of the young boy being beaten, starved, and humiliated came to Snape's mind. He groaned softly and held his head recalling torment the young Potter endured, and how he had blocked it from his mind because of his unnatural hatred of the child. If the charmed blackboard and desk had such a powerful impact on him, a likewise cursed object would effect muggles so much more. Guilt swept over him in waves – not something Severus Snape was accustomed to feeling.

"Sir?" Harry gently said, hesitatingly placing a hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault – Dumbledore is terribly powerful, and rather abusive with it. He's also been stealing from my family's vault for all this time – rather huge amounts of money. He spies on me constantly, and has refused to train me to fulfill my destiny."

Snape looked up with a hollow, disillusioned and dead look in his eyes. "I know you are telling the truth Potter. But why – why would he do this to you – to us? I *know* he isn't working for the Dark Lord."

"Honestly, I'm not sure of his motives" Harry spoke at last, gazing blankly out across the room. "It seems he could overthrow Fudge anytime, if he's after the Ministry position. He's not a poor man, and hasn't spent much over the past 16 years – doesn't need my money

at all. I just want to protect myself from both Voldemort and him, and I've been getting the training I need without his help. I don't want Dumbledore to know I'm on to him, and that I've got any abilities beyond what Hogwarts has been teaching me."

"He uses the portraits to spy" Snape muttered dourly.

"I know" Harry replied. "But the house elves are only loyal to him as long as it doesn't affect me negatively. I do have allies in this castle."

The potions master abruptly stood up. "I will say nothing, and continue on with the headmaster as always. I will let you know anything of importance, Potter. I, too, regret sharing your intimate memories. I will never like your father, but I never wished him dead. I will have to continue to show impatience with you, as you realize how many of the Slytherin students have death eaters for parents. They will report it if I start being nice to you suddenly." He looked at his student uneasily.

"I understand, and expected that" Harry said, nodding his head solemnly. "Thank you, sir." With that, Harry canceled the privacy charms in the room and left.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Transfiguration, Charms, and Herbology weren't much different from the previous years – just more intense and more advanced. The most challenging thing about Transfiguration and Charms would be holding back the knowledge he had gained over the summer. Herbology should go better now that they were close to Neville.

Since it was Harry's first year in Runes, he was alone, sitting mostly with second year students and a few other older students whom like himself, decided to start late, but nobody he knew closely. It was a pretty intense subject, so being alone was probably for the best.

Harry and Hermione agreed to leave their custom wands locked in Godric's Suitcase during Defense. They didn't want Moody to know about them and report back to Dumbledore. They entered the class room with trepidation and took a seat together, watching the retired auror at the front of the room.

Mad-Eye was pacing back and forth, both his eyes scrutinizing each student that walked through the door. He gave the slightest of nods to Harry and resumed his pacing. Harry and Hermione took the time waiting for the start of class to look into his thoughts and get to know the real Moody.

After class Hermione and Harry popped into Godric's Suitcase for a private chat.

"Whew!" Hermione said weakly. "He really *is* that paranoid! I think I want to wash my brain after that."

Harry shook his head a few times. "Ugh – it's just not fun to listen in on crazy people. Right then, what have we learned?"

Hermione laughed, getting her energy back. "Well, he is loyal to Dumbledore and Dumbledore only. That seems to be due to Dumbledore's defeat of Grindlewald and his work against Voldemort during the first war. He doesn't trust Snape because he was a Death Eater, Remus because he's a werewolf, the Weasleys because they are parents, you because you have Voldemort in your head, etc, etc, etc. What a sad, unhappy man!"

Harry smirked. "Yah – that just about sums it up. I'm not going to bother trying to talk to him. So how do we shield this trunk?"

"Hmmm – let me work on it" Hermione said, looking around the room thoughtfully. "So are you going to keep the DA going? He certainly wants you to."

"Probably" Harry replied. "With time slowing and this trunk I have plenty of time for homework, and it can't hurt to have better trained wizards for the upcoming war."

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Professor McGonagall looked at her famous student with shock, fear, and impatience. "What do you mean you don't want to be captain of the Quidditch team?" she sputtered in her brogue. She was holding out the captain badge across her desk toward Harry, as if trying to force him to accept it.

Harry looked at it longingly for a second, and then looked down at his hands in his lap. "I'm sorry, Professor. Things have changed since Sirius died. I'm not going to try out for the team either this year."

The elderly professor's eyes widened in shock.

"Professor" Harry looked at her sadly, "Voldemort is getting stronger. I know that you have heard the entire prophecy." He saw a guilty look flash across her face, which confirmed she had. "I've decided to devote my time to learning how to defeat him. I love Quidditch, and I love Gryffindor, but I have hard choices to make. Quidditch has landed me in the hospital quite a few times – I can't afford to let something happen to me if I'm the one to take down Riddle. I need the hours that go into practice to study in the library and find anything and everything that could help me. Anyway, I'm not sure how well I'd work on the team this year anyway – Ron has been, frankly, quite a jerk lately, and Ginny is giving me the creeps. It is time to replace me."

Minerva felt herself getting choked up. "That is a mature decision, Potter. I can't say I'm happy with it, but I do understand. If you need help with your research, I am here. Do you have any recommendations for captain of the team?"

Harry smiled at her. "I think Ron would be a good choice. He's fanatical about the game, a real strategy wiz, and been on the team almost the longest." *"And I hope the jerk appreciates this"* Harry said to himself.

"Yes, and he's also hard to get along with" she frowned. "I'll give it consideration. Thanks."

Harry glanced around the room, and noticed the lack of portraits in the elderly professor's office. He took a moment to probe her brain, and read in her strong loyalty to Albus Dumbledore, with hints of questioning with his motives. He rubbed his Potter ring and found her desk charmed for loyalty, just as Snape's had been. While getting up to leave, he did the goblin containment charm on it.

He left with a sigh. He hadn't been looking forward to telling her about Quidditch, and he felt on top of that, there wasn't much he could do with her when it came to Albus. There would always be another day.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

"What is wrong, Ron?" Harry asked in a bored monotone, lying on his bed, hands laced under his head, staring at his bed curtains. The red head was lying on his own bed, next to Harry's, reading a charms book for homework, and had been shooting him occasional dirty looks. He would occasionally fondle the captain badge that he had propped up against his book.

"Nothing" Ron growled in a voice that clearly said something was. He looked briefly at Harry before looking away, gathered his badge and book and put them away.

Harry shrugged to himself. *"Hey Fred, George – you guys busy?"* he sent in his thoughts.

*"For you, Ickleharrikins, we are always available"* came back one of the twins.

*"What can we do for you, oh partner?"* came the other.

*"Just feel like chatting"* thought Harry. *"Ron wants nothing to do with me and I'm bummed about it."*

*"Would you like us to 'test' some new products on him?"* Fred almost pleaded.

*"We know he made captain"* George said.

*"The whole bloody world knows he made captain"* Fred joined in.

*"We thought you would be, Harry"* George complained.

*"I quit the team – too much to do this year."* Harry explained.

*"Aaahhhhh"* they said in unison.

*"How's Hermione?"* Fred asked.

*"We are getting really close" Harry smiled. "We will be going out – I wonder how your brother is going to handle it. He doesn't make any moves toward her, but gives me dirty looks when I talk to her."*

*"How can you be sure you will be going out with her, if you aren't now?" asked George.*

*"Um, when you teach a person occlumency, you end up sharing all your most intimate and worst memories and thoughts. We are sort of bonded, you could say.*

*"ALL YOUR MEMORIES AND THOUGHTS?" screamed Fred in his head.*

*"EWWWWWWWW" the twins shouted together.*

Harry chuckled to himself and cut the connection with the twins as Ron gave him another dirty look and Neville walked toward his bed.

"Hey Harry – feel like taking a walk?" He asked him, while eyeing Ron suspiciously.

Harry swung his legs around and sat up. "Sure, Nev. Want to come, Ron?" He didn't want Ron with them, but felt he had to ask to avoid suspicion.

Ron shook his head without looking up from his book. "Naw – I'm heading out with Dean and Seamus in a bit."

The two boys met came across Hermione in the common room, who decided to take a break from her studying to join them. Wandering the halls, they ran into Luna who tagged along.

"I knew you three were coming" Luna said in her dreamy voice. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know" Neville said. I just felt like I had to go, if you know what I mean."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, "like we were being called or something."

The foursome wandered the halls aimlessly for a while, until Neville suggested using the room of requirements to talk privately. Walking back and forth in the area of the seventh floor where the room was located, they concentrated on needing a place to talk in complete privacy. Soon a door appeared on the wall, and they entered.

Four comfortable chairs sat round a low table full of pictures of pumpkin juice and snacks. There were no windows, doors, or areas of concealment in the room – just a tangible aura of privacy and peace.

Hermione jumped into one chair and wiggled in delight. “This is lovely” she proclaimed, with satisfaction. “Now Harry, could you please go over once again everything that has happened over the summer for you? That way we know that Luna and Neville know the whole story.”

Luna maintained her dreamy face, patient and other-worldly. Neville leaned forward in his seat with expectation.

Harry opened his mouth and was about to start talking, when the four ghosts of Hogwarts drifted in through the walls, nodding politely to each of the students in turn. The Bloody Baron spoke first.

“You four are the hope of the school” he spoke solemnly, the other three ghosts nodding in agreement. “Times are dark and your actions are critical.” The baron bowed low to Harry, much to Harry’s shock. “Chosen One, you are to lead the final battle – the actions of the four of you, led by yourself, will determine the future of the wizarding world.”

The Fat Friar spoke up, with a formal bow. “We will answer your call when you need us, and give you training and assistance which has been denied the students of Hogwarts for several generations.”

Young and usually silent, the ghost of Ravenclaw spoke, with a surprisingly musical voice. “Young friends, beware the headmaster. He is caught up with politics and pride, and has forgotten his duty to the children of Hogwarts. You must train to protect the wizarding world, and train to protect the children.”

Sir Nicolas spoke last, with a bow. "At the moment Professor Binns is keeping the headmaster occupied. Please charm the room, Harry, to give you time to talk. But after today, find a better place to meet and train – the headmaster spends much of his time watching you, and he knows of this place."

The Bloody Baron smirked. "You have a trunk that will work, Chosen One. When you are in it, the headmaster will not be able to sense your presence." Luna and Neville looked confused at the thought of hiding in a trunk. "Hogwarts is bonded to the headmaster – it reports to him when asked, feeds him knowledge and power. That is why Dumbledore never left the school for a career in politics – he craves the power that Hogwarts gives him. But she is not pleased with the headmaster, and helps only when commanded. As she will not betray the founders, also she will not betray you four."

"May we stay and hear of your summer exploits?" Sir Nicolas asked.

"Certainly" Harry said, charmed the room for time slowing, and started in. He told them about suffering from Sirius's death, and the headmaster refusing to let anyone comfort him or keep him company. He spoke of his change in attitude – refusing to get anymore depressed over all the death and danger in his life, and to finally do something about it and take control of his destiny.

He told them about the false prophecy concerning killing Voldemort or being killed, and how Dumbledore had been leaking it out intentionally. Harry told everyone about meeting Griphook and how he gained a father and knowledge of goblin magic. He shared the true prophecy with them.

*One who comes is evil incarnate*

*He seeks to destroy all that is not wizard pure*

*He marks the child*

*Who's parents thrice defied him*

*The child born when summer's moon is waning.*

*The child will grow alone, unknown*

*Betrayed by one the wizards love*

*When he comes into his own*

*And learns of his betrayal*

*He will start his true path of learning*

*The child yet not-a-child will learn*

*The king of his time is corrupt*

*The king will work against him*

*And then will rise against him*

*But will not win.*

*The boy will learn the ways of the goblins*

*The ways of the elves,*

*And the ways of the wizards.*

*He will have power the Dark Lord knows not.*

*The young man will find*

*Three close friends*

*They cannot be parted.*

*They were together at the founding of the school.*

*The young man will find*

*Four not-of-the wizards.*

*They will unite the magical worlds once more*

*They will defeat evil, betrayer and king*

*And peace will rule at last.*

“And you feel the four of us are the four spoken of in this prophecy?” Luna asked calmly, while Neville turned slightly green with anxiety.

Harry nodded. “The goblins and house-elves are positive I am the child/man of the prophecy. I just ‘knew’, if that makes sense, that you three are the rest – I think our ghosts here have just confirmed it. And Nev,” Harry looked at his friend earnestly, “Dumbledore’s false prophecy put you in the hot seat too. His prophecy read so it could have meant my self or you, until Voldemort chose me. This prophecy fits only my self now.”

He continued with his summer, how Dumbledore had betrayed his parent’s wishes, and how he had essentially murdered Sirius. He told them of how Dumbledore tried to keep him from Sirius’ will reading, and how he was now Lord Potter-Black. They learned how Harry spent the rest of the summer learning elf magic, adopted Dobby and Winky, and his shopping trips. Finally, Harry shared with them who he knew to be trustworthy due to his occlumency, and whom to avoid.

As Harry added hands to his magical pocket watch for Luna and Neville, they discussed goals toward freeing the world from Voldemort.

“We all need to learn occlumency, and can start that today. Goblin occlumency is much better than wizard’s.” Hermione said. “Also, you two need to learn elf popping and talking – very useful stuff.”

Luna looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. “You know, I think we need Daddy to write an article about Voldemort. He chose that name to be even more intimidating. I think the world deserves to know he’s the half-muggle with the name Tom Riddle. If people could get over being afraid of his name, it will make it easier to fight him.”

“Luna – that’s brilliant” breathed Neville, looking at the witch with admiration.

“Yes, she is my child” the Ravenclaw ghost spoke up proudly.

“Please work on that and owl it to your father. And if he needs extra protection after writing that article, do not be shy in letting me know. I can easily afford to re-locate him or add to his security.” Harry smiled.

Hermione grabbed a quill and parchment. “We need a list of Tom’s strengths and weaknesses.” And she wrote appropriate headings on the paper.

After brainstorming with the ghosts, the list read as follows:

### Strengths

Very strong in dark magic

Lots of hate and anger to fuel dark magic

Followers are intimidated into strong loyalty

Hard to spot followers

Very hard to kill due to dark rituals

### Weaknesses

Arrogance

Cruelty makes disloyal followers

Pride

Followers do not love him

Power comes from sources that don’t owe him anything or mean him well

“Well, it’s not much, but as we learn more, we can add to it.” Hermione sat back and surveyed the list, dissatisfied.

Luna looked at the ghosts. “Is there a way to spy on the headmaster without him knowing?” She asked in her sweet, spacey voice.

The four ghosts smiled at each other. The baron spoke after a pause. "Yes, child. Once you meet together in a more secure place, we will set that in motion for you. Most of the headmaster's knowledge of the school and its students comes from Hogwarts herself, and she's not helping like before, so it's easy to get things accomplished now."

"Hermione and I will start on occlumency lessons with you two in a bit, but first, don't make plans for Saturday. We are going on a bit of a shopping trip." Harry smiled – custom wands were in Luan and Neville's near future.

**00o0o0o0o0o**

Ginny Weasley was mad. Dumbledore had promised her the Boy Who Lived, and she had put up with Harry's shyness and fumbling for years. It was time to cash in – she wanted a famous boy friend the world would envy her for. Yes, he was a bit of a dork, but it would be ever so wonderful to see her name in Witch Weekly, and rub it in the other girl's faces.

The red head was standing in the entrance hall, waiting for Harry to finish breakfast and leave the Great Hall. She frowned, recalling all the times in the past couple of weeks that Harry seemed to be avoiding her. When they had parted in June, she could have sworn there was a glint of interest in his eyes, and she was a witch who, even at her age, was use to getting what she wanted. Dumbledore swore that stupid deer necklace would do the trick...

*"Ah, here comes lover boy now..."* Harry walked through the doors into the hall, talking in an animated tone to Hermione. *"Grrrrr – I could almost swear he was interested in that ugly witch. Too bad – she's Ron's."* "Harry!" she smiled syrupy sweet as she grabbed his arm, "I need to talk to you."

Harry looked decidedly uncomfortable, but nodded to Hermione and let Ginny lead him away from the crowd. She looked around, and grabbing his hand, pulled him into a broom closet.

"Um, Ginny, what do you want?"

Harry had an expression of confusion, annoyance, and discomfort. There was nothing on his face that she wanted to see there.

“Come on, Harry, stop playing stupid. You know you fancy me, and goodness knows I fancy you – when are you going to give in?” With that, Ginny flung herself at the poor bewildered wizard, forcing her lips on his. To her amazement, however, Harry did not return the kiss, but instead pushed her away.

“Ginny, I’m sorry, but I don’t like you that way.” Harry was polite but firm, and moved around the broom closet to the best of his ability to avoid another attack.

The witch felt fury like she had never known. “What do you mean you don’t like me like that?” she shouted. “Of course you do – we were meant for each other!” She eyed his neck, spotting the chain of the necklace she had given him for his birthday. What was wrong – that was suppose to work!

Harry grabbed her upper arms, holding her firmly away from him. “I’m sorry, Ginny. There is nothing between us. I think of you as the sister I never had. You are fun and pretty, but I just don’t fancy you the way you want. Please stop and don’t try. Let’s just be friends like we always were.” He looked at her sincerely and intently.

“Fine” she slammed the door open, wrenching out of his grasp, and stormed out of the closet, face as blazing as her hair.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next morning at breakfast Dumbledore announced a formal Halloween ball. Harry pointedly ignored the puppy dog eyes Ginny was flashing him down the table, and turned to Hermione. “Would you be my date to the ball?” he asked her earnestly.

“I’d love to go with you, Harry” she answered promptly, with a pleased expression.

Ron and Ginny both glared daggers at her and Harry in turn.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Hermione was in the library, working late on an essay for Arithmancy and doing a bit of research on the trunk shielding problem. Harry broke into her thoughts. *“Hermione? Could you pop into the trunk for a bit? I think I’ve got something.”*

She silently gathered her books and parchments and headed out to an empty hallway to pop from. She apparated in and noticed the lights were off in the trunk, and looked around in confusion. Where was everyone?

Suddenly the lights came on, and people jumped out from everywhere, casting off disillusionment charms, yelling “surprise!” and “Happy Birthday!”

Hermione jumped back in alarm, narwhal wand in hand without thinking. Harry had been expecting her to react like that, and had taken the precaution of putting a shield around her when he jumped out. With a nervous, then delighted laugh, she looked around the room. There were the elves, Remus, Tonks, the twins, Neville and Luna – all wearing goofy party hats and throwing muggle streamers at her. Today was her birthday, and she had forgotten!

In a trunk charmed for time management the group partied hard into the night, quaffing butterbeers and birthday cake. In the midst of merriment, Harry gave her a gift of a lovely gold locket to replace the ‘tainted’ one that Ron had given her. It was a bit larger, with lovely engraving, and opened to show a moving portrait of Harry. The locket was also charmed to deflect most school-level hexes.

“Harry?” Hermione asked, examining the locket, “if this is charmed like this, why don’t all wizards and witches wear one? Why even teach hexes and shields?”

Harry smiled at her. “Because very few wizards or witches can afford one. And it’s not returnable, so don’t even threaten.”

## Chapter 13

### Confessions of a Hat

The semester started swimmingly. With the influence of the cursed objects in his classroom negated, Snape was a more patient and fair teacher to all of his students, though one couldn't call him warm by any stretch of the imagination. Harry, Hermione, Luna and Neville met in Godric's Suitcase several times a week for prolonged lessons, and soon were just as proficient in goblin occlumency and elf magic as Harry and Hermione. They kept well ahead in their homework, were studying self-defense as a group, and getting ready to work on a spying project with the ghosts.

Dobby, to his shame, was unable to find the book Malfoy had been boasting about, but he clung to the secret passages surrounding the Slytherin house, and made many reports back to Harry as to who was contemplating taking the Dark Mark, and rumors of upcoming raids.

Harry enlisted the help of the luggage store he bought Godric's Suitcase at to figure out permanent shielding charms against Mad-Eye Moody's magical eye. Luck smiled down on him – the manufacturer of the trunk happened to know the wizard that made magical eyes, and was able, with generous greasing of the palms, to work with him to come up with a solution. The trunk would now look like any other school trunk on the inside to Moody if he happened to be in the boy's dorm looking.

It was early evening; the last week of September, and the fearsome foursome were sitting around on the leather couches and chairs in Harry's trunk. Luna and Neville were playing with LEGO, Hermione studying a book sipping a cup of tea, and Harry working on a potion. Hermione looked up from her book, and let her gaze fall on Harry, and felt her cheeks flush with warmth. She liked looking at him. His shoulders were growing broader with age, though he was still slender and wiry in build. His hair was as hopeless as was her own, but his emerald eyes had a disconcerting habit of making her totally lose all train of thought when gazing at her. Their weeks of occlumency during the summer had driven them impossibly close, and there was a comfortable intimacy between the two of them, similar to the

comfort a couple married for years shared, without a rushed physical relationship. They were a couple, and would be for all time, starting when the time was right.

The century's youngest seeker seemed to feel eyes upon him, as he stood up and stretched, and instinctively looked over to Hermione. He returned her smile and joined her on the couch, gratefully accepting a cup of tea from Winky who brought it without a word.

"Do you have that hair from Ginny?" Harry asked Hermione.

The bushy-haired witch reached into her satchel and brought out a folded piece of parchment. "It's in here. Please tell me that's *not* polyjuice potion?"

Harry gave a chuckle. "Nope – it's a repelling potion. I drink it, once I add her hair, and she won't be able to stand me. Do you want me to make one for you to repel Ron? It's permanent until you drink the cancellation potion."

Hermione giggled. "No, I want to convince him on my own I can't stand him anymore. But thanks."

Harry walked over to the caldron, added the hair that was in the folded parchment, and eyed the cauldron. "Look's tastier than polyjuice at least" he muttered. With a wince, he scooped out a vial and downed it in one gulp. "Ah – instant break-up" he nodded smugly.

"Hey Winky, do you have any idea if Dumbledore is in the castle at the moment?" Harry asked her. The elf gazed upward and inward for a moment and replied "no, master, he has just left according to the elves."

"Heh heh! Watch this, guys!" Harry laughed evilly. He took a dinner napkin and waved his custom wand over it, and to everyone's delight, held a duplicate of the sorting hat in his hands. "Winky, my friend – could you put this in Dumbledore's office for me, and bring back the real hat?"

With a curtsy and a smile, she took the imitation hat and disappeared, returning in a moment with the battered and torn hat of

the ancient wizard Gryffindor. Harry took the hat reverently from the elf, and Hermione gave her a hug of appreciation.

“Bee still under your bonnet, Potter?” The hat growled almost playfully.

“Nope. Just have a bunch of questions for you, if that’s ok with you” Harry said, as the four leaned over to listen.

“Go for it” the hat said. “I’ve been bored to tears lately. Or is it bored to tears, as in torn? Heh heh.”

“Does the headmaster influence your choice at all, when sorting students?” Harry eyed him earnestly.

The hat made an unmistakable growl now. “Yes, as the school itself is bound to the headmaster, so am I. He can communicate with me silently, and can tell me his desires, even if I don’t agree. And sometimes I decide on my own to place a student in a less than perfect house, because of the pressures they would get from family.”

“Were the four of us sorted correctly?” Neville asked. His face fell – he had never felt he was a proper Gryffindor, and many unkind students agreed with that assessment.

Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood are in their proper houses. That’s not to say that they don’t have a balance of all the house’s traits. All four of you have strong traits of each of the founders – that’s what each student in Hogwarts should be aiming for. However, the headmaster had me put Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom in Gryffindor against my better judgment, and it wasn’t for good reasons.

“I was supposed to be a Hufflepuff, wasn’t I” Neville stated sadly, looking down with flaming cheeks.

The hat reared back and practically spat at him “and what is wrong with Hufflepuff? Aye – that is your true house, and it is nothing to be ashamed of. Helga Hufflepuff, wife of Gryffindor, was the most loving and loyal of the four. She kept the other three’s feet on the ground, and was their source of inspiration when Salazar ran out of schemes, when Godric’s courage ran low, and when Rowena’s books and

notes failed her. Hufflepuff was a powerful witch, and not the rubbish bin for half-squibs that people call her house now.”

Neville’s whole demeanor changed in front of them – he suddenly sat taller, prouder and fiercer. He radiated confidence not shown before. “I apologize, hat. You are right. Why did the headmaster want me in the wrong house?”

The hat scrunched forward in scorn. “He wanted you near Potter, to keep Potter humble, knowing he’d learn the false prophecy sooner or later, and feel he was no better than you, weakened by guilt. He had made sure you would be using a wand not matched to your magical core, and manipulated your Grandmother to keep you weak and unsteady. You could have been the chosen one, Longbottom, but Riddle chose Potter instead. You are powerful and worthy of being one of this four. Dumbledore has much to answer for with his meddling.”

“Everyone says I should have been a Ravenclaw” Hermione sighed.

“And everyone is wrong” the hat quipped snidely. “You are the classic Slytherin, my dear.

“SLYTHERIN?” The four shouted in unison.

“Look, kids, I’ve been singing this for years. Don’t you listen at the feasts? Salazar wasn’t evil. He wasn’t even mean. He was ambitious. Tell me a more ambitious witch or wizard you’ve met, than Miss Granger here?” The hat was practically shaking with emotion.

Hermione wore the look of one whose puzzle pieces were all clicking into place. “I AM a Slytherin!” she cried. “It feels... right!”

“Well, this should feel right, too” the hat laughed. “I hope you four figured out that you are the founders, back to lead Hogwarts?”

The room resounded with deafening silence. They all stared at the hat, mouths open, stupid expressions on their faces. The hat quoted for them:

*“The young man will find*

*Three close friends*

*They cannot be parted.*

*They were together at the founding of the school”*

“...Come on – do we have to spell it out?” The hat crowed at them. “Dumbledore is a jerk, but he realized the founders would be coming back after some of the stuff he’s pulled over the last 50 years. He had feelings about the four of you, and decided to keep half of you from your proper houses. I think he also put you, Miss Granger, in Gryffindor as part of a payment to Ronald Weasley if he would agree to put his rather massive ego aside and befriend the poor orphaned Potter.”

“Um, I don’t feel like Salazar Slytherin is in my head and or um, body” Hermione stuttered nervously, with Neville nodding in tense agreement.

“No, you misunderstand me, kids” the hat smirked. You each embody all the perfect attributes of the founder of the house you should have been in, or are in. You, Miss Granger, are not the reincarnation of Salazar, nor related in any way by blood. You are the perfect example of a Slytherin student.”

“Boy, I can just hear Malfoy now” Harry laughed.

The hat continued, “Every once in a while a student will come to Hogwarts who is the spiritual heir of a founder, like you four are. To have all four be here at the same time is a rare occurrence. It hasn’t happened in hundreds of years.”

“What are we suppose to do?” Luna asked mildly. “I don’t think the headmaster will hand over the keys to his tower office if we walk up and ask him.”

The hat chuckled. “No, Miss Lovegood, indeed he wouldn’t. It’s not the proper time to kick old Dumbledore out. You four need to learn all you can, strengthen your magic and make yourselves strong, and finish what they currently call for education here. The ghosts will be your private tutors – you can call them anytime. When you have

completed training with them, Hogwarts herself will lead you to your next teachers.”

“Is Hogwarts sentient?” Neville asked.

“Yes” the hat said. “At the moment she won’t talk to you like I can, but she will warn you, protect you, and obey you all. Right now, try asking her, in your heads, to keep you informed when Dumbledore or ill-meaning people come near your towers.”

Harry cleared his mind and sent out a thought. *“Hogwarts, can you hear me?”* He could feel it – a gentle touch in his mind of a large and kind awareness. It was the closest thing to a ‘yes’ he could imagine without the words. *“Hogwarts, please warn me if Dumbledore or anyone wishing me harm comes near the Gryffindor tower. I will be spending a lot of time in my trunk from now on. If Dumbledore asks you where I am at these times, please tell him I’m in my tower or in bed or something like that. And please let me know if Professor Moody ever comes into our dorm room.”* He felt the very walls and foundation of the building agree with his requests.

Almost in unison the four breathed out “wow.” It was obvious they all had a similar experience.

“Thank you, Sorting Hat” Luna said, with a formal air, “When we fulfill our destiny you will be treated with more respect.”

“I truly look forward to that time” the hat growled, and Harry could swear it puckered its fabric so that it winked at them.

Winky was asked to switch the hat back again, and the new founders of Hogwarts sat and discussed for many hours the implications of what they learned.

**O0o0O0o0O0o0O0o0**

With the aid of time slowing the fearsome foursome were gaining in strength and knowledge at an astounding rate. The hardest thing at times was keeping their power low key, so as not to arouse anyone’s suspicion. Harry popped to Knockturn Alley with Luna and Neville to buy them wands, and Hogsmeade to get them armor, and they were

delighted with the lovely gifts. A few weeks later, Luna was the proud owner of an intricately carved wand, inlaid with amethysts and made out of the bone from a sphinx. Its core was sphinx and fairy hair, and it was capped with a pale and flashing amethyst. Neville was now paired with a wand carved of pale holly, with carved holly leaves twisting up the sides and berries of blood red amber. It was capped with white sapphire, like Harry's, and had a core of wolf hair and magical goose feathers.

Neville was in Godric's Suitcase soon after, lazily flicking his new wand and watching it pulverize a couple articles of Dudley's old clothing Harry had scrounged up for him to play with. "I can't get over how powerful this wand is, Harry" he practically cooed. "It's so hard not to use it for classes."

"The wand isn't powerful, Nev. It's you, mate. A wand is just an instrument to focus your magic. You weren't focused with your old wand, and not as focused with your replacement wand." Harry smiled at him, looking up from a homework essay.

Hermione and Luna popped in. "What's up?" Hermione asked, as she noticed the relaxed atmosphere in the room. "I want to call the Bloody Baron and see about lessons." Frowning gently, she sent a silent message, and the frightening ghost of Slytherin appeared before them.

"How may I be of service" he asked, with a formal yet cordial tone.

"I'd like to start lessons, sir." Hermione answered. "We need some way to spy on the headmaster, please."

### ***Flashback***

*Professor Dumbledore sat at his desk in his tower, sharing a cup of tea with Harry sitting across from him. It was the first private meeting of the school year.*

*"So my boy" he twinkled away at him, "tell me how Hogwarts is treating you so far."*

*Harry strengthened his mental shields. "Fine, sir. I'm enjoying Runes, and Hagrid isn't hurt that I dropped out of Magical Creatures."*

*"Any more pain from your scar, or visions from Voldemort?" Dumbledore looked at him intently.*

*"No sir. It's been a thankfully quiet since the", and Harry paused a moment, "Ministry. You must have hurt him in your duel."*

*Dumbledore looked pleased at that. "Do let me know if you sense anything out him. We need to be constantly alert."*

*"Sir?" Harry looked at him reluctantly. "Could I possibly get some advanced training from an auror or something? I really don't feel like I'm doing enough to prepare for meeting Voldemort."*

*The headmaster gave him the condescending grandfather act. "Now Harry, my boy, just study hard and work with Professor Snape on occlumency. You will be plenty strong when the time comes."*

*With that, Harry felt himself dismissed.*

### ***End flashback***

"Ah" the Baron smiled. "It's time for art lessons then. Send your good elf to Diagon Alley to pick up the following supplies: 2 magical canvas's, one 2" x 2", and the other 3' x 4', magical paint set – beginners, with all the supplies to go with, and the book 'Beginner Painting for Wizards' by Cyril T. Wombat."

Winky looked over from scrubbing a pot and smiled at Harry. "I'll go now, kind master" and popped away. She returned in a short time with all the supplies.

The Baron gestured how to set up the easel and started teaching the kids, Hermione in particular, paint-related spells. "What are we painting, sir?" Hermione ask while squeezing out blobs of paint on a pallet.

"Windows" the Baron answered.

Sure enough, after days of lessons (which in reality took the shortest of time), Hermione ended up painting a tiny rendition of a small window, casement style with no panes in it, and a large picture window, again minus the mullions. The Baron was actually a fantastic teacher – witty with dry humor, but deep and intellectual, with a wonderful impish love of practical jokes. Hermione in particular really hit it off with him.

Wiping paint off a brush with a rag, she glanced over at the Baron and asked “by the way, everyone is dying to know who’s blood that is splattered all over you – your’s or someone else’s?”

“Heh” the ghost chuckled dryly. “People have been asking for generations – why would I tell?”

“Because we are founders?” Luna batted her eyelashes at the Baron in a most un-Luna-ish fashion. Neville gulped when he saw it – the two of them had really been drawing closer, and he was highly aware of the witch’s feminine charms.

“OK” the Baron laughed. “The infamous day of my death. I was a merchant and owned a few ships. I met one of the ships when it docked from the New World, with a hold full of rum, molasses and sugar. I was getting ready to inspect the goods when a rope broke and dropped several barrels of molasses, all of which broke, one of which upon my head. No more Baron.”

“You mean those terrifying stains are MOLASSES?” Hermione yelped. Harry and Neville collapsed in gales of laughter. Luna looked unperturbed as usual.

The Baron laughed right along with them. “Oh, don’t get me wrong - I was a powerful wizard and quite the dueler. But I was also an ambitious man who made his own fortune. It is rather fun to see how terrified the first years and Peeves are of me – I’m really a pussycat.”

“Your secret is safe with us – keep on terrifying ‘em” Hermione snickered, and picked up her next brush.

When the paintings were finished and given time to cure, the Baron taught them many spells to say over them, which Luna took copious

notes of. They stood back and looked, waiting to see what would happen. It was after the magical glow faded, they realized they were looking at themselves in the large painting, the small window dark and blank. The large painting's images moved like a mirror, and annoyingly echoed the sounds in the room too.

"Oh – I get it!" Luna cried, and at the same time Hermione said, "The little one is a camera!"

"Very good" the Baron beamed at the witches. You can hide the little one anywhere in Dumbledore's office – it's such a mess he'd never notice it on a shelf, or stuck onto one of the portraits. I've taken the liberty of asking them and they are all offering their own canvas's to host your spy window if you so choose."

Neville blushed furiously and Luna raised an eyebrow at him. "No, Neville, you may not place it in our dormitory" and she got up and walked to the kitchen area.

Harry tried not to giggle, but failed miserably. He grabbed his father's invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map and searched for Dumbledore, who was missing from Hogwarts. "Super – Hermione – please put a sticking charm on the back of this" and he held out the tiny 'camera' canvas to her. She waved her wand over it and nodded to him. "I'll be right back. Get ready for home movies!" And he popped away.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOo**

It was an interesting week. Anytime the foursome was not in classes or meals or school related activities, they were in Godric's Suitcase monitoring the spy canvas, with out a shred of decent guilt. Harry sent Winky out for Quick Quote Quills and stacks of blank parchment, which were charmed to make records of all conversations held in the office so it wouldn't have to be monitored all the time. Only two days after Harry hid the camera canvas on a much-cluttered shelf in Dumbledore's office, they had the immense pleasure of watching Ron storm into the tower, demanding a meeting with the headmaster.

The four founderettes were sitting in a row on a magically expanded couch, facing the large canvas, gratefully accepting huge bowls of

excellent popcorn supplied by Winky, who was use to the routine by now. "What's on the telly?" Hermione laughed.

"Looks like a penguin" Harry chortled in his best Monty Python impersonation, which was poor at best.

Luna and Neville looked at the two of them in puzzlement, and then at each other trying to figure it out. "Must be muggle talk" Luna shrugged. "Hmmm" Neville agreed around a mouthful of popcorn.

***Ron slammed his hands down on Dumbledore's desk, trying to get his attention. Dumbledore looked up, the customary twinkle most certainly missing from his eyes. "May I help you, Mr. Weasley?" he said in a most unhelpful voice.***

***"How long do I have to put up with this? And when can I start spending that money? I'm so sick of Harry's uppity face, and the years of hand-me-downs and used garbage for school was murder. At least I have good clothes now thanks to Black. I'm an eighteenth generation pureblood wizard, dammit – when can I start living like one."***

***"Sit down, Mr. Weasley. You already know the answers to those questions." Dumbledore looked less than happy to be spelling it out for the furious redhead. You will befriend Mr. Potter until I say so – he needs a close friend to support him until the time comes for him to duel the dark lord. You may start spending your money, which is being held in a trust account, after his duel. Before then people like Harry or your parents will want to know where your money came from. Is there anything else?"***

***"Why me. He seems to enjoy Neville's company more than mine. I can't stand being around him any more. I don't see him around much anyway – he's always disappearing somewhere." Ron was practically whining now.***

***"He keeps company with Neville?" Dumbledore looked disturbed. "Try to discourage that – I don't want them being close friends. No – that won't do at all. Besides," he looked sharply at Ron, "from what I hear and see you aren't doing your job very well. You are hardly ever seen with him."***

***“That’s another thing” Ron interrupted, getting bold again. “What about Hermione? You promised her to me. She won’t talk to me at all anymore. She’s going to the ball with Harry! I thought that locket was fool proof. Who’s the fool, I wonder?”***

***The headmaster looked furious, shocked, and insulted all at once. “Miss Granger is going with Mr. Potter?” He asked, flummoxed.***

***“Harry asked her the moment it was announced” Ron growled. “She said yes with no hesitation”.***

***“Does she still wear your locket?” Dumbledore asked.***

***“I dunno – can’t see under her robes.” Ron whined. “I want her. I don’t want to marry her – she’s not proper for a pureblood, but she’s so feisty – I want to have some fun.”***

Harry glared with white-hot fury at Ron, and Sirius hissed from his portrait on the wall.

***The twinkle came back to Dumbledore’s eyes, as he offered a muggle sweet to Ron, who took it without thinking.***

“You know – I bet his candy is drugged” Luna observed.

“Luna, you really are brilliant – how about going to the ball with me?” Neville asked, handing her the popcorn and looking longingly in her eyes.

“Of course I will” Luna smiled, and gave the happy Neville a kiss on the cheek.

“Shhhhh! “Hermione hissed “I don’t want to miss what ‘lover boy’ has to say. The look Hermione was giving Ron as he discussed her could have burned a hole in the canvas or castrated a Norwegian Ridgeback.

***“I will have a talk with Harry, and your sister. I want him with Ginny and you for now. Do what you can to discourage these unfortunate relationships.”***

***Ron nodded submissively and slunk out of the tower office, with a bit of a stagger in his walk.***

“Yep – definitely something in the candy” Neville quipped. “Glad you don’t fancy that git any more, Hermione.”

“Yah, me too” Hermione glared at the headmaster in the portrait. “I owe that red-headed weasel big time.”

Harry was scowling at Dumbledore with a dangerous expression. “They both are due some payback, but now is not the time.”

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Neville and Luna were having a good snog on the couch in Godric’s Suitcase, charmed for time slowing, when they heard a commotion coming from the spy window into Dumbledore’s office. Ginny Weasley had just come into the room and was looking at the headmaster with bored indifference, touched with an edge of anger.

“Harry, Hermione? If you aren’t busy you might want to watch what’s on the telly” Neville sent to his mind.

“Coming” they both answered at once, and apparated into Godric’s Suitcase. Winky started on the popcorn.

***“Ah, Yes Miss Weasley” Dumbledore twinkled at her. “Thanks for coming, please sit down. Lemon drop?” He offered her a bowl of sweets, smiling benignly at her.***

“Don’t do it – they are tainted!” The four kids laughed and threw popcorn at the canvas.

***“Thank you, headmaster” she said primly, taking a lemon drop and sucking on it. She instantly appeared calmer, less edgy.***

***“Now, tell me, Miss Weasley. How is it going with Mr. Potter?” Dumbledore twinkled at her even more.***

“How does he do that annoying eye-twinkle thingy?” asked Harry. “Will we have to do that when we become the headmasters?”

“Dunno” Hermione answered. “Charmed eyeglasses? Not worth researching in the library for.”

“That’s a first – Hermione NOT wanting to research something” Neville laughed.

Luna looked amused. “Anything to make sure we look different from Professor Dumbledore might be worth looking into.”

“I don’t know” Sirius broke in from his portrait. “I think the eye twinkle would look cute on you cub.”

Harry responded by grinning and tossing some popcorn at his godfather.

***Ginny looked down in her lap and frowned. “Absolutely nothing is going on with Harry. He is totally uninterested in me. I’ve thrown myself at him many times, and he turns me down flat. He asked Granger to the ball. Honestly, I really don’t want him anymore. He’s almost repulsive to look at.”***

Harry nodded with a pleased expression. “Thank you, potions!” Hermione smiled and squeezed his hand.

***“Now Miss Weasley, that’s not what we want, is it?” Dumbledore smiled in a grandfatherly manner at her. With the angle of the spy canvas, they could see him waving his wand at Ginny from under his desk. Ginny suddenly sat straighter in her seat.***

***“No, headmaster. I want Harry for always.” She murmured.***

“Cripes. Do I have to mix more potions to counteract that spell?” Harry whined.

***“Do you know if he wears that necklace we gave him?” Dumbledore asked kindly.***

***“I don’t know, Headmaster. I never see him without his cloak on”***

"Gosh, we stopped wearing the Weasley gift jewelry ages ago" Hermione scoffed. "I can't bear to even look at that tainted locket from Ron."

***"See if you can get Harry to change his mind about taking Miss Granger to the ball. Go on – that's a good girl."***

***Ginny got up and left in a daze. Dumbledore stared at the door after her for a bit, and then called out "Dobby!"***

***"Yes, Headmaster sir? How can Dobby help you?" Dobby bowed and looked every bit the obedient house-elf.***

***"Dobby, could you please tell your friend Harry Potter I need to talk to him?"***

***"Yes sir!" Dobby played the over-eager to help his friend act to the hilt, and popped out of the office.***

***"Now, Mr. Potter" Dumbledore said smugly. "Let's see what you've been up to."***

"Alright guys, I need your help" Harry said in a businesslike tone. "Luna, you are the best at memory charms – help goblin magic some false memories in me for this meeting. I don't want to trust my skills alone."

The blond witch nodded and started chanting and waving her good wand at Harry's head.

"Nev, you are the best for shields – I need one of your undetectable shields so he can't wand-zap me from under the desk." Neville nodded and waved his wand around Harry's body.

Dobby popped into the trunk at that instant. "Harry Potter sir? The Headmaster wishes to see you".

"Everyone wish me luck. Enjoy the show!" Harry smiled, a bit nervously, and grabbed Ginny's necklace of Prongs off his dresser, swiftly putting it on. He apparated from Godric's Suitcase to an empty hall near the headmaster's office, and approached the hidden

staircase, but was annoyed to find he didn't know the password. As he was going through an annoying list of sweets, Snape billowed from around the corner.

"Potter" he spoke in a low, private tone. "Do you have an appointment with the headmaster?"

"Yes sir" Harry replied. "Could I have the password?"

"Do you know what he wants?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"Yes, Professor. He wants to convince me to go out with Ginny Weasley and to stop hanging around Neville. He's just mucking around with my life again." Harry fidgeted, frowning.

*"Don't accept any of his muggle sweets. They are potioned for calmness, truthfulness, and submissiveness. Password is 'Mars Bar'."* With that, the dark-eyed potions professor spun on his heel and strode off, cloak billowing behind him.

*"Love the cape billowing-thing. How does he do that?"* Harry pondered, watching him leave. *"I wonder if the library has a book on cool signature wizard effects, like cloak billowing and eye twinkles."*

With a shrug, Harry spoke out "Mars Bar" and jumped on the revolving staircase. Dumbledore called out "Come in" when he tapped on the door. Glancing around, Harry spotted a portrait looking him over and knew that was how Dumbledore always knew who was on the other side of the door. Heaving a sigh, Harry entered the office.

"Harry, my boy!" Dumbledore was twinkling like a Christmas tree. "Come in, sit down – we haven't chatted in a while. Lemon drop?" He picked up a bowl of candy and handed it to him.

"No thank you, sir." Harry concentrated on being polite and as distant as a grieving student could be expected to be. He looked around the office, noting how everything was repaired. "I'm sorry again about last year, sir. I should be in better control of my temper."

Dumbledore studied the young man carefully. *"His thoughts are just what I'd expect – Sirius, Cedric, Dursleys, Malfoy annoyances,*

*Snape... typical. Nothing new or exciting in his life. Get over Black, you pathetic nothing boy – he wasn't in my plans. Hum – interest in Granger, admiration, innocent feelings – nothing deep or hormonal. Repulsed by Ginny's pushiness – enough to overcome the necklace charm it seems."*

During the moments of silence, when Dumbledore was probing his thoughts, Harry was listening in on his commentary, keeping his face and mind blank to his counter-spying, and keeping his real memories and feelings tightly walled up.

"So tell me, how are you coping with the loss of your godfather?" Dumbledore asked in his most grandfatherly voice.

"I'm OK, sir" Harry spoke with sincere sadness in his voice. "I try to keep busy and not blame myself for what happened. Talking with Remus over the summer helped a lot."

"I'm always interested in your well-being, Harry" Dumbledore continued, "and I hear that you and Ron aren't as close as you use to be. What is up?"

It took super human control and will power not to roll his eyes and/or vomit. Interested in my well-being? Oh brother.

Harry looked at the headmaster, oozing with sincerity. "I don't know, sir. Ron seems to be in a bad mood all the time, and really doesn't want anything to do with me anymore. He's much more interested in hanging out with Dean and Seamus. It's ok – I was really getting tired of his jealousy. I can't help the fact I inherited money from my folks, and I certainly don't like my fame. If he can't understand that, he's really not much of a friend."

"Oh Harry – he has his moments of immaturity, but he really is your friend. He misses you, you know. I can sense these things." Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling overtime, as he sucked on a lemon drop from another bowl. "Sure you wouldn't like a lemon drop?"

Harry shrugged noncommittally and shook his head, declining at the candy. "I really don't miss him and his head trips, sir. I've got plenty of friends."

"Ah, yes, about that" Dumbledore spoke carefully, and Harry could feel tangible magic in the air. "I hear that you are getting close to Mr. Longbottom. I really don't think that is such a wise idea. You know what the prophecy says – the two of you together could make a very tempting target to Voldemort. For yours and his own safety, I think you should distance yourself from him. Remember – Ronald Weasley is your friend."

The young wizard could feel the magic bouncing off his shield, and more being absorbed by his two family rings. *"What a dirtbag!"* Harry fumed to himself, keeping his face blank, *"this really beats all."* But Harry convincingly faked a submissive look and nodded in agreement.

Dumbledore hit him with the grandfatherly eye twinkles again. "So, have you asked Miss Weasley to the ball yet?"

Harry frowned slightly. "No, sir. I'm not interested in Ginny. I asked Hermione already and she said yes."

"But Harry, the Potters are well known for their love of red-headed women. You know you want to go with Miss Weasley."

Harry could feel the headmaster's manipulative magic bouncing off his shields again. He steeled his back – this was something he just didn't feel like faking or giving in on. He faked a confused look and answered slowly "I'm sorry, sir, but I really don't like Ginny very much. She's kind of, well, nasty. Please don't tell Ron I said so. I thought last year Ron liked Hermione, but he doesn't hang around her anymore either. I'm comfortable with Hermione. I've already asked her."

Dumbledore looked surprised for a moment, and there was the quickest glimmer of anger in his eyes. Harry could clearly hear him thinking *"how can he resist that charm? I guess Miss Weasley really affected him negatively and so strongly that he is impervious to anything but an out and out love potion. I guess that's not worth the trouble – too easy to trace."* "Tell me, boy. Do you still wear that

necklace she gave you? You are aware it's been charmed to protect you from certain hexes."

Harry dutifully pulled it out of his cloak to display. "I didn't know that sir. I just like it because it reminds me of Prongs. It's very nice."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. "How's your occlumency with Professor Snape coming?" He asked instead.

Harry made a big show of wincing. "I don't think it's doing any good at all – Snape is not a very good teacher."

"*Professor* Snape is the best we have, Harry. You must keep trying – this is important."

"Yes sir" Harry answered dully and submissively. Feeling himself dismissed, he said good bye to the headmaster and left, returning to his tower. Making sure the room was empty, he apparated back into Godric's Suitcase.

"Enjoy the show?" Harry asked smugly, to be met with a pelting of popcorn.

"Boy, what a manipulative *jerk* our headmaster is!" Neville spat.

"Yes, but he's sooooo concerned for you, Harry" Luna added sarcastically. Hermione just stewed, tapping her foot with arms crossed in anger on Harry's behalf.

"Yah" Harry agreed, "It took everything I had not to do the 'Technicolor yawn' when he started in about Ron being my mate."

"Technicolor yawn?" Luna asked.

"Sure" Harry snorted. "Technicolor yawn. Shout at your shoes. Buick. Driving the porcelain bus. Blow chunks. Spew. You get the picture. Anyway, I couldn't give in about Hermione and Ginny. Nev, we can fake not hanging out anymore – we meet in here all the time, and can chat telepathically all we want, and give ol' twinkle-eyes the impression I'm obeying. After this year we won't have to pretend anything anymore – he will know something is up when I don't return

home to the Dursleys. But I can't pretend to want to go out with the red tart. That's not fair to Hermione, and I just can't stand Ginny!"

The four kids quickly cleaned the popcorn from the floors and furniture with cleaning charms, all the while coming up with even more creative euphemisms for barfing. Then they apparated back to various places around the castle.

Luna paused before returning to the Ravenclaw quarters. She eyed one of the many suits of armor that lined the corridors of the castle. With a dreamy smile and lots of inspiration, she grabbed her wand and set to work on a gift for their beloved headmaster.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next Saturday the headmaster woke up, stretched and yawned. It would be a good day, he decided, as he reviewed his recent discussion with Harry Potter over again in his head. It was annoying that Harry refused to feel attraction to a young witch that was firmly under Dumbledore's control, but the Boy-Who-Lived was still his chess pawn on the board of his war.

Donning one of his more stunning robes, deep purple with golden embroidered stars and matching hat, the headmaster combed his beard and adjusted his eye-twinkle in his mirror. Time for a hearty breakfast – the kippers were calling.

Turning the first corner on the way to the Great Hall, Albus Dumbledore was greeted by one of the rusty suits of armor that nodded to him and spoke in a gravelly voice "Ugh – you make me feel like hurling." It stood still and didn't say another word.

"Curious" Dumbledore muttered out loud, and resumed his trek toward breakfast. The very next suit of armor, however, grabbed its stomach and moaned "It's Albus! Time to bow to the porcelain god!" The armor proceeded to make some very convincing barfing sounds.

The headmaster stood and gawked at the now-frozen armor. He heard a clanking behind him, and spun around. A group of three empty knight-husks moaned and said "Ew – that was chunky!", and

“visiting the upchuck wagon!”, and “I’m revealing last night’s dinner!” Then they went back to in-action. Albus felt a tad green.

It was getting annoying now. There had to be 50 sets of armor between his office and the Great Hall, and each one of them came to life just long enough to tell him how nauseated they were, make appropriate sound effects, and went back to silence. Dumbledore tried to ignore them, stepping up his pace to a brisk walk, but he kept having “Tossing my guts” and “Speeeewww!” and “Heave-Ho!” and “Lunch, redux” hurled at him. He was feeling totally off breakfast now. The voices even added very convincing sound effects to go with the repulsive words.

Dumbledore ran, trying to sprint past the annoying euphemisms being thrown at him and attempting to outrun his rage.

...”Riding the porcelain pony”...

...”Gagging with gifts”...

...”Doing the intestinal tango”...

...”Riding the upchuck choo choo”...

...”Recycle Din-Din”...

... “Liquid laugh”...

...”The Rainbow cough”

Seething with anger, the ancient mugwump calmed himself with a charm and put on his twinkly grandfather look as he opened the doors to the hall and took his seat, hoping he could keep down a cup of tea at least. Then he spied a copy of the Quibbler by his plate. From outside the huge doors to the Great Hall the echo-y voices of the suits of armor could still be heard yelling “emptying the cauldron“, and “hair ball management“, and “cough the corn“, and “riding the porcelain pony“.

After the last of the knights had its say and was still, Dobby and Winky stood in the empty entrance way, looking around with

disappointment. “None of you used “UFSS – Unidentified Flying Stomach Stuff“, Dobby muttered dejectedly.

“Chewy burp is my favorite” Winky nodded.

Back inside the Great Hall students were looking out toward the entrance hall, puzzled at the strange shouting and puking they heard. Few noticed their headmaster was looking decidedly pale. Luna was eating breakfast with the Gryffindors, absentmindedly munching on a pastry, reading the latest edition of their family’s newspaper. She smiled her slow dreamy smile and tossed it to Neville. “Here you go, Neville. I think you will like this.” “*All of you will like this*” she added telepathically to Harry and Hermione.

## ***The Real You-Know-Who***

***By anonymous***

*Acting on an anonymous tip, the Quibbler is proud to present this article, the result of months of careful research. In this exclusive, learn the real story and history of the so-called ‘Dark Lord’, and feel free to confirm the facts yourself.*

*Lord Voldemort, the name he has chosen to call himself, is in fact Tom Marvolo Riddle, a little known wizard from Little Hangleton. He was born in 1928 to Merope Gaunt, a reclusive young witch who died giving birth to him, and Tom Riddle Sr, a local muggle who abandoned his wife before his son’s birth.*

*Tom Riddle was raised in an orphanage until he started at Hogwarts, where he quickly became known for his quick mind and winning ways. A handsome youth, and the last surviving heir of Slytherin, he was known in school for charm, intelligence, and unfortunately, a fascination for the dark arts and lack of true friends. Despite strong suspicion that he was the heir of Slytherin that opened the Chamber of Secrets, resulting in the death of one student, Myrtle Baker, Riddle was made Head Boy in 1944. Another student was blamed for it instead, and suffered the humiliation of wand snapping and expulsion, and to this day has never been compensated or apologized to. Riddle, on the other hand, received a Medal for Magical Merit for pointing fingers at the innocent student.*

*Riddle graduated from Hogwarts in 1945, where he took a job with Borgin and Burke's on Knockturn Alley as a clerk and procurer of rare items. It was a suspicious job in this magazine's opinion, seeing that a young wizard with the talent he showed could have found employment at many prestigious places. He left the position abruptly after the disappearance of Hepzibah Smith, a witch who sold Riddle many priceless treasures.*

*During the time of his employment with Borgin and Burkes, Tom Riddle Sr., his father, and his grandparents were found dead in the drawing room of Little Hangleton, with no apparent injury or cause of death. The gardener was quoted in the muggle news as having seen dark-haired, pale teenage boy in the village the morning of their death.*

*In the years between 1945 and 1970, Tom Riddle took to wandering and learning all he could about the Dark Arts. He was rumored to consort with the very worst of witches and wizards, and gained an unquenchable thirst for power and immortality. His dealings with evil transfigured his once handsome appearance to a more sinister and strange visage, but it was still recognizable as the once-attractive youth.*

*In the 1970s, as many will remember, he now openly called himself Lord Voldemort. This was due to his hatred of the father that abandoned him, and that he wanted to hide the fact he was a half-blood himself. He started to work on what he considered the wishes of Salazar Slytherin – to rid the world of wizards of mixed ancestry and muggles, although where he came up with the idea that this was the goals of Slytherin are unknown. There are no written records or handed-down tales to support Riddle's twisted beliefs about the Founder.*

*Riddle gathered a following whom he called "Death Eaters". They started out as loyal friends who wanted to share in the power he was amassing, but many ended up to be weak wizards who were too scared to stand up to him.*

*We are sure everyone in the Wizarding World now knows the story of how Lily and James Potter, powerful fighters against Voldemort, made a friend Peter Pettigrew their secret keeper of the location of*

*their home. Unknown to them, Pettigrew was a Death Eater, who promptly betrayed them to Riddle, leading to their deaths. However, when Riddle tried to kill their one year old child, Harry, with an unforgivable, it mysteriously rebounded back on himself, and destroyed his body, leaving him formless for 10 years.*

*Riddle spent that time evidently inhabiting animals and lesser creatures, until he was able to find host in the body of Quirinus Quirrell, the Defense against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts in 1991. Riddle/Quirrell spent the year in search of the fabled Philosopher's Stone, created by Nicolas Flamel, in the hopes he could restore a proper body for himself. He was defeated by Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, with the help of Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley. These three students were never rewarded for their bravery and service.*

*In 1992 a known Death Eater arranged for an old enchanted diary of Riddles to be smuggled into Hogwarts, where it was able to possess a student (whom we will not reveal the identity of), and re-open the Chamber of Secrets. Riddle almost succeeded in coming back, but Harry Potter once again defeated him and the monster of the Chamber – a basilisk! This brave young wizard once again championed the wizarding world and yet was never rewarded or even recognized for his heroism.*

*The year 1994 was the start of the second war, when Riddle succeeded with the help of Peter Pettigrew to get a rudimentary body made of unicorn blood and snake venom. With Pettigrew and Barty Crouch Jr.'s help, Riddle was able to get Crouch a job as the Defense teacher at Hogwarts polyjuiced as the retired auror Alastor Moody, and manipulated Harry Potter as a unwilling forth contestant in the Tri-wizard Tournament. The tasks ended with Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter tying for first place, but unknown to themselves, Crouch had turned the winning cup into a portkey to Little Hangleton. Riddle succeeded in restoring a body for himself using Mr. Potter's blood, various disgusting objects and the assistance of his Death Eaters. Mr. Diggory was killed by the Death Eaters and Mr. Potter was able to escape.*

*The following summer of 1995 was one of the Ministry's darkest. They refused to believe that Riddle had returned, and lost almost a full year they could have been preparing for the Second War. The Ministry did, however, succeed in placing a completely incompetent Defense teacher in Hogwarts who was rumored to resort to blood quills for punishments and refuse to teach practical in Defense. Riddle was witnessed by many people in a battle at the Ministry of Magic, where Fudge found himself in a position of being unable to deny Voldemort's return any longer.*

*The Quibbler questioned Albus Dumbledore in several matters concerning Tom Riddle, which he refused to answer. How could the greatest wizard of our time, a master at occlumency, not know how evil young Riddle had become while at Hogwarts? Why was the student Riddle wronged over the Chamber of Secrets never cleared? How could Dumbledore hire Quirrell who was hosting Riddle? How could Dumbledore not know that his Defense teacher in '94 was a polyjuiced version of one of his oldest friends? And why has he kept Voldemort's identity, known to him self all these years, a secret from the public?*

*The Quibbler refuses to call Tom Riddle by anything but his real name any more. Riddle is a powerful dark wizard, for certain. But he is only human, like any other wizard. He is not a Lord, he is not all-powerful, and we find it ironic that a man born of muggle father and witch mother is trying to rid the world of all mix-blood wizards.*

*End of article.*

"Wow" Neville exhaled, as he read the article telepathically to Harry and Hermione. He glanced up at the teacher's table, and was not surprised to see Dumbledore glaring down at Harry in unmasked fury. You could hear various pockets of students around the room growing silent as copies of the Quibbler were being read. People took to staring at Dumbledore in disgust, and at Harry with expressions of awe, disbelief, pride or hatred, depending on the person.

"Well" Harry said with a wan smile "this will stir up Riddle, no doubt. I'm going to hide in my dorm until Dumbledore calls me for a meeting – I want to spy with my mind link and see what old Tom's reaction is."

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Dobby popped to Harry's side. The young wizard was laying on his back, grinning as he listened in on Riddle. Ol' Tom wasn't happy in the least. One new recruit, a quivering, cowardly Death Eater, had brought him a copy of the Quibbler insulted at the 'lies'. The Death Eater was rewarded by becoming the individual to get most of the crucio's and the servant developed a strong suspicion on why Voldemort would react to the article so violently.

Riddle was about to burst a blood vessel. His brain was a paranoid whirlwind of fear, anger, embarrassment and suspicion. He feared somehow one of his Death Eaters had talked with the magazine – Malfoy or Wormtail, but Fudge, Potter or Dumbledore could have written the article. He could swear his followers were looking at him with less respect.

The day before the issue came out Luna's father had relocated his business to a heavily warded and concealed new location, so Harry wasn't worried when Riddle sent a team to the old location of the Quibbler. They would go back empty handed which would send the dark wizard into even deeper levels of fury.

"Harry Potter, Sir?" Dobby touched him gently on the arm. "The Headmaster is wanting to see you immediately. He is not happy, sir. It's because of Mistress Luna's article."

"Thanks Dobby." Harry swung his legs around, sitting up and smiling. "I've been expecting him to call for me."

Harry entered the headmaster's office, and was amused to see Luna sitting serenely in a chair in front of a very red-faced and furious Supreme Mugwump. She sent Harry a telepathic *'I told him I got the information for the article chatting with you and you knew nothing about it'*.

Dumbledore conjured an overstuffed chair for Harry and rather rudely gestured him to it. Harry wore the perfect blend of confusion and innocence on his face and in his thoughts. As he sat, the headmaster practically threw the bowl of lemon drops at him, which Harry declined, only maddening the ancient more. Dumbledore then flung

the current Quibbler at Harry and tersely spat “What do you know about this?”

He made a show of reading the article, acting as if it were the first time. He looked up when finished, glanced over at Luna and back to Dumbledore and said “nothing sir. I didn’t write this, if that’s what you mean.”

“Don’t play cute with me, boy.” Dumbledore was turning redder by the second. “I have been opening howlers all morning – I’ve got a team of house-elves doing it now, and they are just as mad as I am. Where did Miss Lovegood here get all this information! This is supposed to be private between you and me! Where do you get off treating me like this, after all I have done to protect you! You owe your very life to me, Harry, and this is the thanks I get!”

If Albus Dumbledore was in a fury, it was nothing compared to what Harry was feeling inside. The readings Dumbledore was getting off of Harry read only confusion, bewilderment and a strong sense of betrayal toward Luna. But inside Harry wanted to lash out screaming at his once beloved headmaster, and let him know just what he owed him. However, with the supreme effort of strength and maturity, Harry stayed in control.

“Sir” Harry spoke after a moment of feigned nervousness, “you told me to confide in friends. Luna is a friend. I did not think she was going to write an article.” He shot her a fake angry look while sending a telepathic apology for the act.

“Headmaster” Luna interrupted in her mild, unperturbed manner, “Harry had mentioned a couple of the things that I used in the article, like the fact that Voldemort is Tom Riddle, where Riddle went after his body died, and the horrible way your predecessor treated poor Hagrid. The fact he defeated Riddle in his first, second, forth and fifth years is common knowledge to everyone at Hogwarts. Riddles’ identity was confirmed by looking at the Ministry’s public domain records, copies of which I received by owl. Very little of the article was from Harry.”

Dumbledore whipped his head around to glare at the young witch. “You, Miss Lovegood are facing expulsion at the very least. I think it’s in your best interests not to speak unless spoken to.”

Harry was taken a back at the venom coming from the headmaster, but Luna, calm as ever, merely raised an eyebrow. "On what grounds, Headmaster? What school rules have I possibly broken? Is anything in that article untrue?"

"YOU....I....IT...." Dumbledore sputtered and spit, completely out of control. He spun around a few times, as if trying to decide whether to jump around his desk and strangle the two students, or to grab Fawkes, who was looking very concerned, and throw him like a feathery quaffle. Finally he fell down heavily in his chair, rubbing his left arm with apparent pain.

Harry stared at him, willing thoughts in the front of his mind about fear for himself and Luna, and confusion. But in his private thoughts he watched the headmaster massaging his arm with fascination. Was it possible Dumbledore was a Death Eater?

"GET OUT!" the ancient screamed at them, wildly gesturing toward the door. They got up and left without another word or backwards glance. "I don't want to see any more articles!" He screamed after them.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next few weeks brought uproar to the wizarding world. Few people knew that Tom Riddle, the charismatic boy from Hogwarts was in reality the feared Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore was inundated with angry howlers (as if there is any other kind), demanding to know why he kept this information secret. The feared evil wizard was human, and therefore was able to be destroyed – the article helped the side of light immensely.

Rita Skeeter, not to be outdone, did a complementary article for the Daily Prophet, which took a lot of the heat off of Luna and the Quibbler. After a couple weeks the uproar died down, but the Death Eaters never looked at their boss quite the same way again. Finally, the other good thing to come of it was Hagrid found him self with an official letter of apology from the Ministry, and permission to purchase a new wand and continue with his education. Better late then never, the delighted half-giant had a bouquet of rare flowers from the

forbidden forest sent to Luna in thanks. Neville probably enjoyed them even more than she did.

## Chapter 14

### What's On The Telly?

Draco, heir to the house of Malfoy, was daintily wiping his lips, having just finished dinner. Pansy, his betrothed, was simpering over him, boring him half to death. *Stupid cow – too bad there are so few attractive pureblood wizards that know which side to fight on.* His thoughts turned to dark things, which was the norm. *'Soon the Dark Lord will vanquish, and the purebloods will be respected above all others, as they should be. Can't wait to see Longbottom's reaction to the news tomorrow morning. Heh – hope the Lestranges' make it painful for the old vulture-wearing bat...'*

Hermione and Harry's heads snapped around to Neville, as Luna came over and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. All four had been eavesdropping in on Malfoy's thoughts at the same time. With a barely discernable nod, the four wandered out of the hall separately, and apparated to Godric's Suitcase.

"OK" Hermione started "What's the plan? Contact the Order, or the aurors?"

"I just tapped into Tom's head – it is a legitimate raid and not a false lead" Harry said.

Neville was pacing the floor nervously. "First things first – may I bring Gran here? She will certainly be safe." The three nodded and he popped off to collect his Grandmother.

"Winky, Dobby?" Harry called out. They popped before him immediately. "Hi guys. Are you real busy?"

The two elves looked at Harry like he was crazy. "Your needs are our priority, Harry Potter sir" Dobby said.

"Oh yeah" Harry said. "I can't get use to that. Um, Neville's Grandmother will be living in here for as long as her life is in danger. Can you help me fix up a room in here for her, so she can have privacy? I don't know how many house-elves live with her, and

maybe we can partition off a storage room for her stuff. Any help you can give her in moving would be great.”

The elves closed their eyes a minute, and Luna, Harry, and Hermione could hear them call out to the elves for help in moving. Dobby smiled and said “I will help, with some friends, shrink all of Mrs. Longbottoms furniture and belongings – we can fit them easily in here. Winky will assist you three in creating a room for her.”

“Fantastic” Hermione smiled at Dobby as he popped away.

Winky looked around the trunk’s magic room. “Master, we can expand this room much larger than its current size. It is sort of like the Room of Requirements, and doesn’t have to be kept to these dimensions.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “That would be great! Let’s give her a bedroom and make sure it’s large enough for a sitting area, and private bath.” He sent a message to Dobby *“Dobby – we have a large bedroom and sitting area for Mrs. Longbottom – make sure you know which furniture she would like to have in it.”*

In surprisingly short time Neville apparated back with his Grandmother, who seemed quite stunned to see her grandson practicing elf magic. Introductions were made all around, and she was touched and pleased with her new apartment. Harry oversaw the elves, which had Longbottom manor emptied within a few short hours, and Mrs. Longbottom’s personal house-elf Nippy set up her new rooms for her.

The matriarch sat down on the leather couch facing Dumbledore’s spy window. With a highly arched eyebrow, she asked with starch in her voice “not that I don’t appreciate what you are doing for me, is there any reason you four children are choosing to spy upon your headmaster?”

Neville sat down across from his grandmother. “We have a lot to fill you in on – the war has a new twist now, and we want to be honest with you.”

She gave her grandson a look of surprised respect. "I'm listening, Neville."

The four gave her a quick run down on Dumbledore's dealings with Harry. The matron gave a sad sigh. "Albus Dumbledore saved the wizarding world from Grindlewald in the 40s. I will never forget how brave and self-sacrificing he was. We owe him a lot for that. I don't know what has happened to the man to make him so manipulative and self-serving since then. Perhaps he has just lived too long. I do not doubt what you have told me – you can't question that he did not respect your parent's will, Harry, and that is shocking enough by itself."

Harry spoke gently to Mrs. Longbottom. "I know, ma'am, that he has been the strongest warrior for the light. I don't know what exactly he is trying to gain from his treatment of me. I thought at first it was political power, but he could have that at any time for the asking. I think it's more like he's stretched himself too thin, extending his life too long, and that has clouded his judgment. I think he's using the philosopher's stone to keep going – I don't believe he ever destroyed it like he said he did, as we only have his word for it. According to the school ghosts he is basically addicted to the power Hogwarts gives him as headmaster. I think he's old, weakened, addicted to fame, glory and power, and not willing to share any, or give it up. I don't believe he is evil – just not thinking of others except as a means to his ends."

"I think that *is* evil" Mrs. Longbottom sadly smiled. "I feel that's how the trip to the dark side starts – when you are willing to use any means to do what *you* feel is right."

Luna spoke up after a pause in the conversation. "What are we going to do about the raid on the Longbottom estate? If we tell Dumbledore, he will want to know where we got our information. If we tell the ministry, they will too. It could be an excellent chance to capture many death eaters, but we don't have the knowledge or skill to do it ourselves yet."

"Professor Snape!" Harry blurted out. "He can tell the order and the aurors that he heard Malfoy, just like we did. He wasn't at the last two

meetings Riddle held, so I doubt Tom will suspect him as a spy. I have potions in a couple hours – I'll make sure I get detention. And Hermione?" Harry turned to her "Can you look into better ways to imprison death eaters? I don't believe for a moment that Azkaban is secure anymore. We need a way to keep them absolutely away from Ol' Tom."

Hermione nodded and walked over to the book cases and Harry apparated away. She watched Nippy, Mrs. Longbottoms' elf, carefully straightening the feathers of the vulture on her awful hat.

"Why a vulture?" Gran Longbottom asked with amusement at the carefully blanked look on Hermione's face. The young witch nodded with curiosity.

"Ah – it's an old custom" the elderly witch sighed. "In my day all witches had birds on their hats for different meanings. A young dove meant the lady was single and available, a crow meant the witch was on a mission or bound to a calling, a quail was a mother or housewife. You will note that several of your professors use the modern version of a single feather in their hats. A vulture was the sign of mourning. I never have got over the loss of my husband. When and if the time comes, and I feel up to a new husband, I will remove the vulture."

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry allowed himself the luxury of spying on Tom's thoughts late that evening, after Snape sent him word letting him know the order and aurors was safe and fine, and 15 death eaters had been captured.

*Wormtail, where are my death eaters? What is taking so long? One old lady and a few house-elves shouldn't have taken them more than a half an hour tops. The wards were breeched according to Bella. Go, now, and see what is happening.*

Harry could feel the anger and inpatients pouring off of Voldemort. Wormtail was gone a short while, with Voldemort fuming and fidgeting the whole time, hissing at his snake and pacing the floor. After what the evil wizard felt was an eternity, the rat appeared before him.

*M-m-m-master? I bring bad news...*

*What? Riddle was seething with danger, glaring at the pathetic, groveling rat of a man.*

*T-t-t-they are all captured, my Lord. They walked into a trap – I was able to hear the clean up committee of the aurors. All 15 are in Azkaban, with no losses to the aurors. The Longbottom estate was never entered, and she and all the possessions are missing. Someone betrayed us and gave them plenty of warning.*

*CRUCIO!*

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0**

Harry was enjoying a leisurely Saturday morning breakfast with Mrs. Longbottom in the suitcase, watching his Dumbledore spy canvas. Snape had just billowed into the office, looking very grouchy and tired.

***Headmaster, it is very early in the morning. I was up late last night with the Dark Lord, and I really would have liked some sleep.***

***Ah, yes, my boy. Thank you for giving us the warning. But what has happened to Mrs. Longbottom? Any ideas where she went?***

***I don't know – ask her son, if he hasn't blown himself up. He did have potions yesterday.***

***Well, I'm sure she's safe. What did Voldemort have to say?***

***He was furious, needless to say. He took most of his fury out on Wormtail, fortunately. He is certain he has a spy in his group, but he is suspecting some older members – perhaps Bella, as she didn't go on the raid. He is growing dangerously paranoid. I do not know of any other raids planned, but I don't think he would share that information with me. The only reason I knew was because Draco was boasting to me, who knew because his foolish mother was boasting to him. She has a personal vendetta against the Longbottoms.***

“That's for certain” Mrs. Longbottom smiled, sipping her tea primly.

***How is occlumency going with Mr. Potter? I had him in here the other day, and he didn't seem to be attempting to block me at all – clear as a bell to read.***

***What do you expect, headmaster? He is as arrogant and stubborn as his father – he will never learn. The boy is unteachable.***

***Well, keep trying, Severus.***

“What’s up with the Malfoys and you, if you don’t mind me asking?” Harry questioned the elderly witch, who smiled to herself.

“Narcissa wanted to arrange a marriage between Draco and Neville before they were born, if one was a girl and the other a boy. I refused to consider it because of their affinity to dark magic. It was quite the social slap-in-the-face for the young mother.”

“Good” Harry nodded. “I just can’t see the two of them together.” *“Boy, I can’t wait to tease Nev about this...”*

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The remainder of October was spent with Mrs. Longbottom playing grandmother to them all. She actually loved the role, and enjoyed her quarters in Godric’s Suitcase, chaperoning the four founderettes and helping to spy on Dumbledore. She grew quickly sickened by the headmaster’s dealings with people, and was more than glad to report any dirt she could find on him.

The five of them were surprised at the depth of Dumbledore’s duplicity. They learned that one reason that Cornelius Fudge was so insecure was that he couldn’t think for himself. The odd little minister would floo over to the headmaster’s office at least once a week and pick Albus’ brain for advice on how to handle matters that he shouldn’t need help with in the first place. There was no doubt Albus was reading his thoughts thoroughly during these sessions. Fudge would eat so many lemon drops each visit, it was a wonder he could stay awake for his chats.

Order members came in and out of the office, but they didn't have much information to share. Harry felt twinges of guilt – he could listen in on Tom more, he supposed, but was scared of the evil wizard catching on and shutting him out. He wanted to save the link for when they were more powerfully trained, so he could take him out for once and all. In the meanwhile, he listened in on Draco frequently, and when he caught wind of raids, would let Snape know.

An on-going source of speculation was Dumbledore's relationship with Draco Malfoy. That boy had broken so many rules over the years, and tried to hurt so many. Now he was a known Death Eater. Why was he still in school? However, as Harry did get a lot of valuable information on Death Eater activities by spying on his mind, he didn't actively try to remove the arrogant pureblood.

Halloween broke clear and cool, with the great hall festooned in its usual glory. Harry felt a bit of apprehension getting ready for the ball – the Tri-Wizard ball was a complete flop. To this day Parvarti still gave him dirty looks whenever she thought he wasn't looking, and he couldn't really blame her. He felt confident in this ball, in that he knew Hermione would be kind to him if his dancing was bad, and if they didn't feel like dancing, he knew he could have wonderful conversations with her. Mrs. Longbottom was thrilled to give the four of them dancing lessons, which helped both Neville and Harry's confidence. Ron hadn't spoken to him since he invited Hermione, despite what the red head had promised Dumbledore. Ginny, on the other hand...

### ***Flashback***

*"Harry – you can't go with Hermione you know" Ginny pleaded with desperate eyes. "She's just not, well, right for you."*

*"How do you mean?" Harry practically growled. He wasn't happy about being cornered in an empty classroom by Ginny, and he wasn't pleased about the conversation in the least.*

*"Well, you know Ron has a thing for her – you don't want to hurt your best mate!"*

*“Ginny, Ron has never asked Hermione out. Not once. As for Ron being my ‘best mate’, he hasn’t spoken five words to me since last school year. I have no idea what he wants or who he fancies. Hermione said yes to me, without a moment of hesitation, so I think she isn’t pining for him.” Harry was feeling more put-out by the minute.*

*“But Harry, she’s not even pretty! How could you want to go with a buck-toothed bushy haired yak like that, when you could have me!” Ginny threw her arms around his neck and ground her hips a bit to emphasize her point.*

*Harry jumped back like she was a blast-ended skrewt. “I think Hermione is beautiful. Her teeth were fixed several years ago, if that is even important, her hair is fine, and her personality is fantastic.” Harry gave Ginny a very discouraging glare.*

*“You mean to say you really prefer her to me?” Ginny stood there stunned, gaping at him in disbelief.*

*“Yes, Ginny I do! Now please, give it up! I’m going happily, gladly and merrily with Hermione to the ball.”*

### ***End of flashback***

Harry straightened his tie in the mirror of his dorm. Ron was wearing new dress robes this year, in a deep blue color that didn’t clash with his hair, and a new style that didn’t clash with everyone’s sensibilities.

“Who are you taking to the ball, Ron?” Harry asked in a friendly tone, waiting for the fireworks. He brushed invisible dust off his sleeve – his robes were deepest green, which Hermione promised would match her dress perfectly, and showed off his eyes quite nicely.

Ron shot him a very dirty look as he combed his hair. “Me and Lavender have been seeing each other.”

“Great! She’s quite the looker” Harry said, and turned away to meet his date. Ron continued to shoot him dirty looks long after he had left the room.

The ball was a huge success in Harry's estimation. Hermione was gorgeous in a deep green gown that matched his robes and her figure to perfection. Her hair was upswept again, like at the Tri-Wizard ball, but her eyes were only for him. They danced and laughed and chatted, and were amazed as the hours flew by. Every slow dance he gazed into her brown eyes, lost in their liquid depths. The Boy-Who-Lived knew what he had to do, and do soon. Here, in his arms, was his reason to survive the war against Riddle. He had to vanquish *and* live.

Neville and Luna were equally delighted with each other's company – she wore a gown of iridescent pale blue, with her hair elaborately arranged. She looked like a sweet, pale fairy, and Neville was absolutely smitten. Luna, dreamy and other-worldly as ever, floated in Neville's arms, showering him with many kisses when he least expected it.

Naturally, not everyone at the ball was happy. Although Lavender looked every bit as pretty as Hermione and Luna, Ron spent more time glaring at Harry than looking at his date. The headmaster was less than pleased watching the proceedings, and Ginny, on Dean's arm, spent way too much of her time shooting petty looks at the couple of her ire.

The four friends ended the evening in Godric's Suitcase, visiting with Mrs. Longbottom, Sirius and the elves, and having a pleasant late-night cup of hot cocoa. Harry could feel the war was coming soon, but for today he would indulge in simple pleasures with his friends.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Minerva McGonagall sat in her private quarters, winding down with a late night cup of tea. She frowned as she recalled the look on the headmaster's face during the Halloween ball. Albus was certainly furious – mad to the point of barely being in control. She tried to find out what was bothering him, but he snapped at her so rudely, she backed off.

The ball was lovely everyone agreed. It did her heart good to see the young couples falling in love – many bonding with their future husbands and wives. Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, secretly her two

favorite students, made the perfect pair. And Minerva grew positively misty-eyed when she thought of Mr. Longbottom and Miss Lovegood together. Who would have known the shy Gryffindor and odd Ravenclaw could make such a perfect team.

Naturally not everything went smoothly during the evening. Mr. Malfoy had to be stopped from hexing a young mixed blood witch in the rose garden (and was awarded a week of detentions with Mr. Filch), and Miss Lavender Brown had to be spoken firmly to after she dumped a bowl of punch over Mr. Weasley's head. A strange way to treat one's date, the elderly professor mused.

What was up with Albus lately? It seems that recently he was acting very strange. Oh not the typical Dumbledore strange, with his perchance for muggle sweets and gaudy robes, but, well, *sneaky*. It was with shock she caught the headmaster glaring at Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, as if he was angry with them for some reason.

Albus' relationship with Mr. Potter was something she never could understand. She accepted his decisions as being what was best for the boy without question for years. Now she was not so sure. She clearly remembered watching the Dursley's all day before Albus left Lily's young baby on their doorstep, and she tried to convince him it was a mistake. The blood wards do sound powerful, but to leave a child in a home where he might not be welcome? Albus did assure her that he checked on the boy frequently, but every September she was always upset to see how skinny and malnourished the child seemed. Something just wasn't right.

A sudden yell of anger, a thump and the sound of marbles or some such matter filled the hall and broke her from her reverie. The noise of thousands of marbles rolling down the castle halls filled the room. Minerva jumped to her feet, tying her tartan robe around her waist, and opened her door. Looking back and forth, she was shocked to see the headmaster lying in the hallway at the base of his gargoyle, half buried not in marbles, but millions of lemon drops. The sour candies were bouncing and rolling down the hall, sticking to walls, his hair and clothing, and castle stone.

“Albus! What happened? Are you all right?” she called down the hall. There was no way the elderly witch was going to try to walk on the round candies, and it would take quite some time before that many could be removed with magic.

“Somebody *pranked* me!” the mugwump sputtered with fury. “My office is filled floor to ceiling with lemon drops!”

Further down the hall, around a corner, a lone figure in a fairy-perfect gown of iridescent blue smiled a dreamy smile at the couple of odd lemon drops rolling past her feet. Pale blue eyes blinked slowly with satisfaction.

“Mischief managed” she whispered, turned and left for her tower.

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## Chapter 15

### Secret Santa

The semester was winding down. Harry hired the goblins during one of his monthly luncheons with Griphook to renew and replace all the wards guarding the Longbottom estate, which they were glad to do. Now that the manor was unplottable to all again, Mrs. Longbottom and her elf Nippy moved back in after many thanks to the foursome.

As far as the Hogwarts staff was concerned, Luna, Neville, and Hermione were going home for Christmas holiday, and Harry was going home with Neville (despite some flack between Dumbledore and Harry over the matter). What actually happened was a practice run for what they wanted to do during the next summer holiday. The four boarded onto the Hogwarts express, dragging trunks and all. As soon as they got a private compartment, they shrunk their trunks and put them in their pockets, except for Harry, who called out “Winky!” who popped into the compartment with a smile.

“Here you go” Harry said, handing her his shrunken magical trunk. “Set it up like I told you, and send me the message when we can pop in”. He let Hedwig out the window with instructions to fly to Longbottom Manor for the holiday.

“So where are you putting the trunk?” Neville asked in a low voice. “If you leave it in the tower, I’m sure Dumbledore will go through it.” Luna and Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Not saying until we get there – I don’t want any chance of being overheard” Harry smiled mischievously.

*“Masters, Godric’s Suitcase is ready for you”* came Winky’s telepathic message.

With a smile, they waited for the train to arrive at the station, knowing as soon as they could step out of sight, they would apparate back to the trunk.

Winky and Dobby welcomed their four masters (as they thought of them) with open arms and a lovely buffet of food. Godric’s suitcase

had been altered yet again – this time the right hand wall had two large bedrooms, each with a private bath. Now the girls and boys had separate ‘dorms’. The large great room was arranged to feel more ‘homey’, with large dining room table, lit fireplace, music playing from a wireless, and the large couch and arrangement of chairs facing the ‘telly’.

First thing Hermione, Luna and Neville did was run to the enchanted windows to see where the trunk actually was. They saw nothing but a dark stone room with some trash scattered on the floor. It seemed like Hogwarts, but where?

Harry, leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, laughed at their puzzlement. “You’ve all been in this room before” he teased.

“Oh!” Hermione cried. “The room of requirement! We practiced popping here when it had no requirement!”

He nodded, pleased. “Yep! I had Winky put us about three trunks down on the stack, so if Dumbledore or anyone comes in here for any reason, we won’t look out of place. She took all my school stuff out of the upper compartment and filled it with trash from the other trunks incase anyone wants to look through them. I think we will be safe here.”

Luna was looking out the windows around the room. “What if someone needs the room of requirement – what happens to the trash, and us, in here?”

“I’m not sure, Luna. I’m certain we are safe though – the junk in here is never damaged or moved. Now – is it configured into the furniture and settings in the room? No – Winky and I did some tests. What I didn’t have time to test is whether we stay in the room, hidden, and get to spy on who ever is in here, or if we move to another dimension for the time the room is in use. It should be interesting to find out.”

“Ewww” Hermione complained. “I’m sure I don’t want to watch students snogging in here...”

“Not to worry, Hermione,” laughed Neville. “It is the holiday – I doubt if any will be in here.”

“It’s lovely, but not very festive,” Luna observed. “We need to decorate for Christmas.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “We have no schedule for the next few weeks – we can pop in and out as we choose, as long as we stay disguised. Personally, I’m going to Diagon Alley, and come back with a tree and stuff.” With that, Harry changed into his Edward Evans look and popped out.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry popped back into Godric’s Suitcase later that afternoon, stomping snow off his boots and enlarging a lovely tree from his satchel. Winky and Dobby immediately took to setting it up in the corner by the fireplace.

“Oi – don’t block my view!” Sirius barked with a grin.

As Harry was emptying his satchel of ornaments, garlands and trimmings, he glanced over to see what his friends were doing. Initially he had thought they were watching the Dumbledore Channel on the ‘telly’, but he realized they had shifted the couch, and popcorn in hand, were staring intently out the window.

“What are you looking at? Spiders building webs?” Harry asked sarcastically as he walked over. He found himself blushing furiously as he saw what the entertainment was. Sure enough, the room of requirement was in use, and obviously their trunk was able to watch the events without being in the same dimension. Malfoy had turned the room into a teenage make-out pad, redolent with muggle lava lamps, disco lights, and a crackling fireplace. Draco himself was lounging on a couch putting the moves on a 4th year Slytherin girl, Raven Smythe, who was encouraging him by the look on her face.

“So, um, Luna. Is that really what girls think is a romantic retreat?” Neville giggled with embarrassment. It was like seeing a train wreck – it was awful, but you just couldn’t turn away.

“No, Neville. It’s what boys think is conducive to snogging. Girls see it as tacky.” Luna smiled, snuggling up close to the Hufflepuff/Gryffindor.

*"Come on, Rave, you know you want to..."* Draco refilled the girl's glass with what looked like firewhiskey, and slid closer to her. She giggled and slid a bit away, but certainly wasn't trying to discourage his advances.

*"What about your betrothed?"* she teased.

*"What, Pansy? She's cool. She knows I'm a man and have needs."*

*"Maybe I have needs too, Draco. I'd like to marry someone of a good family and social standing. And I have a lot more to offer than her..."* and the girl seductively licked a drop off the edge of her glass while giving Draco looks that could melt steel.

"Why are we watching this?" Harry gulped, turning away from the windows.

"Oh Harry, we will shut the curtains if he gets anywhere with her. But Luna and I have a galleon on the outcome." Hermione laughed, never taking her scornful eyes off the pair of Slytherin lustbirds.

"What outcome would that be?" Harry asked, unpacking and hanging some glass balls on the tree, pointedly not looking out the window.

"I say he will get a snog and more, and Luna says he will get no more than a snog." Hermione nodded, pulling the aforementioned galleon out of her pocket and slapping it on the coffee table in front of them.

"What do you say, Nev?" Harry asked, handing greenery garlands to the elves to hang around the fireplace. *"Still not looking"* he thought to himself, blushing away.

"I can't believe he could do that to his fiancé! Pansy is so smitten over him – what does he hope to gain? Oh – I agree with Luna – I think Raven is trying to get something out of him in return, and is just leading him on."

*Draco set his glass down and leaned over to the girl. "What needs?"* he lustfully growled, with a total lack of sincerity.

*“Slow down, Draco. I want to take Pansy’s place. My family is as wealthy as hers, and almost as old. I’m not a bit of fluff on the side – I want a good marriage, and to choose my partner before my parents choose for me. You know Pansy is ugly, simple, and petty. Break it off and have me.”*

Draco sat back like he’d been slapped. *“I, um, I don’t know what to say.”* He stuttered, frustrated and angry at being put off like that.

*“What you mean,” she purred dangerously, “is that you thought I was good for a little fun and games, and that’s all. Have your folks get in touch with mine if you want to see any more of me.” With that, the pretty young girl got up abruptly and flounced out of the room.*

“Pay up, Granger” Luna held her palm out smugly.

“Uh uh! “ Hermione protested. “You bet ‘only a snog’. Mr. I’m-too-sexy-for-my-shoes didn’t even get that. It’s a draw.”

Laughing at Draco’s misfortune, the four set to decorating their digs for the holidays. “Hey – no fairies!” Neville complained. It was wizard tradition to light their Christmas trees with live fairies that would blink and glow soft magical light.

“Oh, yah – about the fairies. I didn’t get any because I felt kind of bad for them. I mean, they are live creatures – do they like being stuck on a tree branch for weeks at a time? What happens with them after Christmas? Are they people, or just animals, or plants?”

Luna smiled at Harry. “It’s hard for Neville and I to imagine not growing up in the magical world. Fairies have been part of the wizard’s celebrations for centuries. I’ve had wonderful Christmas’s chatting with them. Why don’t we buy a set and you can ask them? I promise they aren’t being abused.”

Harry nodded in agreement, and sent Winky out to get a set of fairies, asking her to pick a talkative set.

The elf returned with a fancy box with bright Christmas graphics on the cardboard. Inside the box, peeking through the cellophane was 20 tiny little creatures, human in shape and appearance, except they

were glowing the softest shade of pink, and had lovely, transparent wings. They were dressed in filmy material and clung and floated around them like it had a life all its own. They blinked and smiled up at the kids crowding around the box. Harry carefully opened the lid and the fairies sat up and yawned and stretched, and pointed at the tree in the corner.

Hermione spoke softly at the small beings “can we ask you some questions? We’ve never talked to fairies before.”

They smiled and nodded, and a male fairy stood up and bowed to them. “Chosen One,” he spoke in his tiny voice, facing Harry, “it is an honor to adorn your tree.”

Harry bowed in return. “Er, hi. What’s your name?” The tiny fairy looked pleased, as did his companions. “I am Erind, Chosen One. These are my tribe.”

“How is it that wizards use living, sentient beings to decorate a tree? Do you do this willingly?” Hermione asked in astonishment.

Erind turned his serious eyes toward the bushy haired witch. “Great lady, as the house-elf is born to serve and nurture, the fairy folk are born to beautify. We live in secret places throughout the year – sometimes in the presence of wizards, sometimes far away. When the holiday season approaches, we gladly go to the factory to be boxed. When a wizard comes to buy lights for their tree, we reach out with our magic to sense which tribe of fairies would be most compatible with that family. That is why you feel a certain attraction to a particular box of us.”

“But what do you get out of it?” Hermione asked, bewildered.

“Every time a witch or wizard looks at their tree with love or pride, we feed off the magic you radiate. Every time love is shown near our tree, it strengthens us. It gives us the magic to live throughout the rest of the year. In turn, we give beauty, and a sense of rest and peace, and help re-enforce the positive feelings of traditions and family.” Erind smiled at Hermione, nodding.

“What happens if your tribe isn’t bought for a tree?” Hermione asked, frowning in concern.

“Then we leave the stores the week before Christmas, and find public trees to adorn. Your trees in the Great Hall, the trees in small shops, or in the Ministry buildings are samples of that. The magic is still strong, because when you see the public displays, your hearts are filled with cheer.” The other fairies nodded in agreement.

Neville laughed. “I always thought the fairy lights were sold out by the week before Christmas! I never paid attention. I did always wonder why so many places waited until the last moment to decorate!”

“Unlike Muggles, who decorate two months before” agreed Hermione.

“Erind, we are proud to welcome your tribe to our home” Luna spoke gravely, bowing at the 20 little creatures. To everyone’s surprise, they all stood up in unison and bowed in return.

“Great Lady, heir of Ravenclaw, we are honored to serve. We have been called to your home to train you in the magic of the fairy. Joy and peace upon this dwelling.” And with that, they flew up gracefully, trailing sparkles of magical dust, and flew to the partially decorated Christmas tree by the fireplace. In mere minutes the remaining ornaments were perfectly arranged around the room and tree, the fireplace seemed to flicker with more color, the wizarding wireless came through more crisply, and the room seemed to radiate love and warmth. The four kids ran into their respective rooms to wrap what gifts had been purchased already and place them under the tree.

“Hey!” Neville walked over to the tree and looked at the fairies, settling comfortably on their branches, now glowing brightly. “What do you guys need to eat or drink? And why doesn’t the box come with instructions!”

A pretty little girl fairy laughed in a tiny, tinkling giggle. “My Lord, we don’t want people to worry about us throughout the holidays, and be a burden for the season. We find crumbs and sustenance throughout the house when everyone is asleep or away.”

Neville smiled and walked over to the book cases, with the look of one trying to recall something.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next week was a blur of Christmas shopping, trips to relatives and friends, and all around fun. Harry spent a few sessions training with Sir Nicolas on better dueling techniques, but at one point let loose a blast with his new wand that was so powerful, it actually rocked the trunk. Breakage in the trunk was repaired swiftly, with no permanent damage, but the kids were worried to see Dumbledore look up from his desk in shock when the blast erupted, and leave to investigate.

Winky had popped out of the trunk to straighten the room of requirements to look like it did before the explosion, and returned. The four founderettes stood gaping out the trunk windows waiting for Dumbledore to enter the room and sense their presence. Even though the trunk was soundproof, no body made a noise.

The headmaster entered the room, peering around at the broken and unused trunks, furniture and bric-a-brac. He poked around a couple boxes and frowned at the walls. Harry could plainly hear him talking to the castle.

“Hogwarts, what was that disturbance?”

Harry and his friends felt the castle answering that it was merely an explosion caused by Peeves.

With a nod the ancient turned and left the room to return to his office.

“Whew” gasped Neville. “I didn’t know I could hold my breath that long.”

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Between the map and the spy canvas, Harry was sure the headmaster had left the school for a while. He gathered up some bags, jars, and tools and called Winky and Dobby and turned to Luna.

“Hey, Luna. Keep an eye on the map for me – if Dumbledore comes back, send me an elf message, ok?”

Harry popped with the elves to the Chamber of Secrets. There it lay, undisturbed for three years, the carcass of the basilisk he had killed. “Now, if this grosses you guys out, feel free to pop back to the trunk. But I could really use the help.” Harry said while unpacking various instruments and charming the room for time slowing. “It turns out that certain parts of the basilisk are incredibly important for some rare potions, and it’s almost impossible to find. So we are going to render this rather ripe snake.”

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Professor Snape sat down by in fireplace in his private chambers, conjured a cup of tea to relax with before dinner. His eyes suddenly fell on a rather large box, wrapped in Christmas paper, sitting on the floor by the hearth. He waved his wand around the package, looking for hexes and booby traps, but it came up clean. He carefully lifted the tag with the end of his wand, and read that it was from Potter. With a sneer he tore the paper open.

The potion master’s jaw dropped when he saw the contents. There, neatly labeled and most professionally rendered, were jars and vials of basilisk hide, venom, eyes, and various organs. The headmaster had told him the body of the giant snake was burnt up when Potter had killed it. Here were thousands of galleons worth of rare components – enough to experiment with for years to come. Happy Christmas indeed.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry was making his last shopping trip to Diagon Alley to pick up some custom made gifts, and stopped at Gringotts to meet with Griphook.

“Urush-Gai!” Harry cried joyfully at his teacher. Griphook smiled warmly and conjured up a good hot lunch to share with his student. “Here” he tossed the goblin a brightly wrapped box “Happy Christmas!”

“Happy Christmas to you, Ursoo-Tow,” Griphook returned, pulling out a gift from his desk for Harry. “It’s not much, but it’s what you asked for. I have another gift being worked on.”

Griphook tore the paper off the small box Harry had lobbed at him. Inside was a very ornate, masculine necklace, radiating goblin magic and power. He looked at the boy in amazement. “Do you know what this is, my Ursoo-Tow?” his teacher gasped in a low, strained voice.

“Um, no. Not really, Griphook.” We have been spying on Dumbledore, and I saw him making a big fuss over this in his office one day. I know it is goblin by the style and magic it radiates, and it doesn’t give off any trace of evil or dark magic. I figured he didn’t get it by honest means the way he was acting.”

Griphook was caressing the necklace with love and respect, and curled a lip at Harry’s reply. “No, Mr. Potter, he didn’t. Excuse me a moment.” He scribbled a note on an enchanted paper airplane, like they use at the Ministry, and sent it off. “I took the liberty of inviting King Flailhide to lunch with us.”

“That important, huh?” Harry glanced over at the necklace on the desk, impressed, as he tore open the wrapping on his gift. It was what he asked Griphook for – a framed photo of the two of them together. He grinned at his teacher friend and thanked him.

After a short wait, the door opened and in strode the most imposing goblin Harry had ever seen. He was a good foot taller than Griphook, younger and fiercer. The King was dressed in battle armor, and not the useless ceremonial type. Harry and Griphook immediately knelt in front of him and bared their necks, in the Goblin gesture of submission.

Flailhide gestured them to get up and seat themselves and joined them in eating. After finishing the meal and drinking the last of the beverages, Griphook pushed the box with the necklace in it to the monarch. “My Ursoo-Tow here brought this to me for a Christmas gift, your majesty. I thought you would like it more.”

It is difficult to catch a Goblin warrior by surprise, but this did it. The King gaped at the box, moving his head between Griphook, Harry

and the necklace in disbelief. He finally gasped out in Goblin that translated to “Our beloved Dragon Ear has returned!”

Griphook nodded solemnly. “Ursoo-Tow found it in Headmaster Dumbledore’s office, and recognized it as a Goblin artifact of importance. He felt it had not come to the headmaster by honest means.”

King Flailhide cast a critical eye over Harry. “This is your Ursoo-Tow, whom you speak so proudly of” he said, more as a statement than a question. Griphook nodded. “Lord Potter-Black, you have done the community a huge favor, though I sense you aren’t aware of the enormity of what you have done. This Goblin forged necklace, which we respectfully call ‘the Dragon Ear’, is our oldest artifact. It is thousands of years old, although perhaps to your human eyes that doesn’t seem possible. Its magical powers are not enormous, though it is rumored among the wizards to be. It is symbolic to the Goblin, handed down from King to King, much like the muggle crown jewels. When it disappeared from Gringotts, there were only a small handful of individuals that could have managed the crime, and your headmaster was under deep suspicion.” The king frowned darkly, as he lovingly caressed the necklace. “If we were not living in such precarious times, the Goblins would have ceased relations with the wizards for this alone.

Harry paled at the thought. “If it isn’t that powerful, your Majesty, then why would Dumbledore want it?”

Flailhide and Griphook both grinned feral-like. “Because, Ursoo-Tow, Dumbledore doesn’t know that it’s not all-powerful. He obviously believed the rumors and hoped it would help him against Mr. Riddle perhaps.”

The King turned to Griphook, standing up. “I must go and make this joyful announcement. Griphook you have my permission to do that which you had requested – gladly and gratefully. Here are the signed forms.” The King waived his fingers and a folder appeared which he placed on Griphook’s desk. He then turned and bowed formally to Harry. “The thanks and gratitude of the Goblins is yours, Lord Potter-Black. When you go to battle, call on us. Do not ask us, however, to

follow Albus Dumbledore. We are in your debt, not his. If I see him ever again, only one of us will leave the meeting alive.”

With that the powerful leader left the office. Harry gaped after him, feeling floored at what just happened.

“Mr. Potter, it was as if the Crown Jewels, or Mona Lisa or the Statue of Liberty had gone missing and was returned unharmed with no strings attached. What you did was something the Goblins will not forget. The Dragon Ear is very sacred to us.”

Griphook opened the folder the king had given him, smiled and signed his name to a sheet inside. He looked at Harry and told him “now for my second gift to you, Ursoo-Tow. If you agree and sign this, you are legally my son. I will not expect you to live with me or obey me, as you are already an adult, but I never had children. I wish you to be my heir, and this is the way I can express my affection for you the best.”

Harry felt his eyes stinging with tears. “I’d like that very much, Griphook. I’m honored.” He spoke softly and reverently, picking up the quill and signing his name without hesitation. He looked up at his teacher/father, and for the first time in his life, saw tears in the eyes of a Goblin.

“You are now Furybolt, son of Griphook. And I may now call you Harry” he spoke with his beloved sharp toothed smile.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry headed to the Weasley’s shop after taking some time in peace in quiet in a booth at the Leaky Caldron. He needed to recover for a bit from the emotional time he spent at Gringotts. Harry Furybolt, son of Griphook!

The twins were delighted to see him and dragged him in the back room, where he charmed the place for time and privacy, and sat down for a nice long chat and gift exchange.

“So what are you doing about gifts for our prat siblings?” asked Fred.

“Are you giving them some of our products?” George grinned evilly.

Harry laughed. “Naw – I’m giving them nice, non-committal things. And here are a couple tokens of my love and affection.” He tossed a box to each of the twins.

“Oh Harry – bad form. You got us confused” George smirked, looking at the tag on his package.

“Did not” laughed Harry. “Sorry, but as we share the ‘Weasley network’, you can’t pull that on me.”

The twins laughed and tossed Harry a couple gifts too. Besides the usual box of latest gags and inventions, there was a lurid, flashing dragonhide vest of the most tasteless design imaginable. It looked like something the twins would wear.

“Cheers!” Harry chortled. “This is a riot. I know it will really annoy Ron to see me wear this.”

Fred was delighted to open a box of muggle magic tricks and books, and George was ecstatic with a box of muggle gag gifts and a DVD of Spike Jones. “Hours of inspiration here!” George nodded with satisfaction.

Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to know what a whoopee cushion would inspire in magic, or what horrors he had just unleashed on the wizarding world.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry dropped in on Leonard’s shop briefly, to give him a small package. Leonard took him in back and opened the box, and was astounded to find Harry had given him several basilisk heart strings and tendons.

“Where ever did you get these from?” Leonard breathed with reverence.

“From a basilisk” Harry answered with dry amusement.

“Well, yes!” Stuttered Leonard, “but where did you ever find a basilisk?”

“Second year of Hogwarts. It was a real pain to kill, let me tell you. Nasty blighter almost got me first. I recently came upon a book that explained how to render the parts down for potions, etc. I never realized the carcass was valuable. I’m glad it was still there.” Harry watched the man caressing the box lovingly.

“You killed a basilisk in your second year at Hogwarts? What was that for – advanced defense against the dark arts?” Leonard looked at the young man with amazement.

“Extra curricular activities” Harry snorted, and left, wishing Leonard a Happy Christmas.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry spent some time Christmas Eve morning spying on Tom. He didn’t do it often, as he didn’t want to risk being found and blocked by too much spying, but he was worried that Christmas would be a perfect time for an attack. But Voldemort was spending his yuletide drunk on firewhiskey, torturing several of the death eaters on his naughty list, and driving himself into a frenzy of anger over the loss of 15 of his best at Longbottom Manor.

Neville and Harry popped to Longbottom Manor later that morning for a quick visit to Mrs. Longbottom, and so Harry could send his gifts to the Weasleys, visit Hedwig, and collect the gifts to him self.

“Happy Christmas, Neville darling” his Gran nodded to him, causing the Hufflepuff/Gryffindor to turn bright red. Harry thought for a brief instant that she was going to shake his hand. She was certainly not the huggy-touchy-feely type of parent. They spent a pleasant lunch with the matriarch, collected gifts to return to Godric’s Suitcase, and said their good byes.

Popping back, the tree was now surrounded by brightly wrapped boxes and parcels. Harry shook his head in amazement – the whole trunk was filled with Christmas like he’d never experienced. His whole sad childhood the Dursley’s tree was surrounded by gifts for Dudley,

and never any for himself, and it had been no where near as festive as this. Fairies flittered all over the place – the original 20 of Erind's tribe mostly stayed in the tree, but there were dozens more that were never purchased that now lived in the greenery, garlands and nooks and crannies of the trunk. Luna never went anywhere without 5 or more gently floating around her hair, resting on her shoulders, or whispering magical secrets in her ears. She had just popped back herself from visiting her father, exchanging gifts, and checking his newly reinforced wards.

Neville reached into his satchel and drew out a large plant, the size of a banana tree, but with feathery leaves and scores of deep tropical pink blossoms. "Hey Erind – I've got a present for you and your friends!" he proudly proclaimed as he placed the plant on the opposite side of the fireplace from the tree. Sirius grinned down from his portrait and gave him the thumbs up.

Fairies flew from every corner of the house, oohing and ahing over Neville's plant. Even the ever-present fairies surrounding Luna abandoned her for the flowering foliage. "What is that, Nev?" Luna asked, coming over to give him a kiss and look the lovely plant over.

*Candidus noeverflowera*, commonly known as 'fairy fern'. I remembered reading that it's as attractive to fairies as clover is to bees. I happened to have one in my greenhouse at home" he grinned. "Oh – it is mildly intoxicating to fairies, too. Happy Christmas, little friends!"

Christmas morning everyone woke up early, with childish excitement in the air. Throwing on bathrobes and rubbing the sleep dirt from their eyes, they all gamboled into the common area like puppies, grinning and hugging in holiday merriment. Winky and Dobby had a lovely breakfast waiting, with smells of bacon, coffee, and sweet breads mixing with the heady pine, perfuming the air. The six of them chowed as quickly as was possible while still staying vaguely in the realms of politeness, throwing constant glances at the tree and its gifts.

Finally, it was time. Everyone gathered around the tree and started to hand out gifts. Fairies were flying drunkenly all over the room,

giggling and blowing kisses. Several were tangled in Luna's long pale hair, singing what was probably fairy drinking songs, and a dozen more were laying all over the fairy fern daintily nibbling on the pollen of the blossoms. Harry called his house-elves over and tossed them a couple boxes, who looked bewildered.

"The Great Harry Potter gives elves *gifts*?" Dobby stammered, and Winky looked up with tears in her large round eyes.

"Well, of course" Hermione laughed, giving the elves a crushing hug. "Here are my gifts to you, too."

At the end of the unwrapping, Dobby and Winky were the proud owners of necklaces with the Potter and Black crests that they could wear under their clothes for now. Hermione had given Winky enchanted needles and scissor so she could make new clothing for the both of them, without being 'given' clothes and Luna gave them an assortment of fabrics that could only have come from Luna. Neville had given them each a pouch with healing potions, scaled down for elves.

"Is Winky the happiest elf in the world?" Dobby asked with a grin. "I don't think so – I still think it is Dobby!"

Harry got tons more LEGO from the elves (which was appreciated by everyone), a new penseive from Neville and his grandmother, dragonhide arm guards from Remus, a beautiful watch fob with aquamarine from Tonks, and a fur lined cloak from Hagrid. From Mr. & Mrs. Weasley he got home made fruitcake and a lovely sweater, still made by Mrs. Weasley, but out of cashmere yarn this time. Ron sent him the usual box of Honeydukes chocolate (gee – could he spare the money? Hermione asked snarkily), and Ginny, much to his disgust, gave him a bottle of Viagra.

"What's Viagra?" Neville asked innocently.

"Never mind" Hermione and Harry gulped in unison.

Neville and Luna looked at each other bewildered. "Must be a muggle thing" Luna shrugged her shoulders.

“Yah” Harry grumped. “Quite the muggle insult.”

Luna had given Harry a magical photo album, the size of a muggle credit card that could expand on demand. It was filled with photos of all his friends from school with room for more.

She also gave each of the founderettes a necklace that was charmed so when they wore them, they could all see the strange fairy creatures she had been talking and writing about for years. That was a bit of a shock – where they were some of the few people that didn’t believe Luna was, well, *loony*, they had rather believed she had a very active imagination. Wearing the necklaces, they could see all sorts of fairy and enchanted creatures scurrying around the baseboards, flying through the air, and inhabiting what they thought were empty spaces. Luna had quite the smug expression on her face as she watched them staring around the room in shock. “And that” she proclaimed, pointing at one extremely strange creature outside the window in the room of requirement, “is a Crumple-Horned Snorkack”. And it was, too.

Harry gave Luna a blown glass globe on a wooden base, with a miniature Hogwarts inside. It was actually a like muggle snow globe, but he had enchanted the globe to play soothing music and show the weather outside when touched. To Neville he gave a goblin knife that was enchanted to never need sharpening and a sheath for it that could tie around a leg or arm.

Hermione smiled at Harry. “I want to give you your gift, but I have to get you out of this room for a bit.”

Harry smiled back “that’s fine, because I want to give you my gift in private” and led her by the hand to his room. Hermione gave Dobby a ‘thumbs up’ as they left the common room. They shut the door and sat down on the edge of his bed, and Harry brought out a small box, and got down on a knee in front of her.

“Hermione, I know I’ve never officially asked you to go out or anything. I hope I wasn’t taking too much for granted. We have grown so close; I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else. Would you please marry me when we get out of school?” He opened the box to reveal a ring. It wasn’t an engagement ring like the muggles wore,

but more like a golden eternity band, set with pale flashing gems round the circumference. The stones were the colors of water, lightest blues and greens and clears.

She looked up in wonder into his eyes. "Harry" she whispered, "we've never even kissed! I know I love you and want to marry you, but are you sure?"

He smiled gently at her, and sat on the bed again, taking her hand in his. "Hermione, we might not have been snogging all over the castle, but we have shared memories and deepest thoughts. We both know this is right. I'm sorry if I haven't been too aggressive, but I never want you to feel cheap like Ginny makes herself, and I didn't want to push myself into a fiasco like Cho."

Having shared all those memories, Hermione knew what he meant and smiled. "Yes, I will gladly marry you. I'm not sure how my parents will react, but yes." And they shared their first kiss, a kiss of promise, gentle passion, and deep, honest love.

They broke away and Harry handed her the magical planner he had snuck from her bedroom. "Your parents were a bit shocked at first, but I explained how we have bonded and promised we were not rushing things. Your dad gave us his blessings as long as we wait to finish school."

"Oh Harry" she swooned with gratitude, hugging him. "I'll chat with them in a bit. I'm afraid my gift to you is no where near as wonderful."

With a laugh, Harry pointed out that saying 'yes' was about as fantastic of a Christmas gift as he could ever get, but he allowed her to lead him back into the common room.

The sight that greeted his eyes was stunning to say the least. Ignoring the grins of his friends, he gazed, slack jawed, at miles of metal tracks and gears enveloping the room. Up near the ceilings, around the whole circumference of the trunk, and filling unused corners, was a roller coaster of tubes, tracks, and mechanics, with large glass spheres gently traveling around, up and down. Everywhere you looked were marbles doing loop de loops, traveling up ramps and down, swirling and changing colors as they moved.

There was a gentle whirring and clicking that accompanied it, but nothing loud or annoying.

“Do you like it?” Hermione asked nervously. It takes each ball 15 minutes to do the whole room, and can be charmed for silence if you don’t like the noise. And each ball can be charmed to give a sensory message when you hold it, like this” and she plucked a green marble off the track and handed it to him. Harry held the marble and was amazed to distinctly smell fresh baked gingerbread. He plucked another marble off the track, and that one played ‘The Coventry Carol’ as he held it. “They are all charmed for Christmas senses right now – we had a blast doing it.”

“Hermione, I love it!” Harry breathed, running around the room following the marbles, and plucking ones off at random to see what they smelled, tasted, felt, or sounded like. One even felt like a puppy with a wet nose! Fairies were flying around, racing the marbles and looping around the track in tipsy delight. As he drooled over his new toy, Hermione proudly showed off her ring and status as the fiancé of Harry Furybolt James Potter-Black.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Remus and Tonks were snuggled together on the couch in the parlor of Grimmauld Place, wrapping paper strewn around the floor, sipping cocoa together. A brand new engagement ring glittered on Tonks left hand, and love glowed around the room.

“Should we tell Harry what his watch fob does?” Tonks asked idly, admiring her shoes.

“Owl him” Remus said, nodding. “He always hated floo travel, and that will finally let him use the floo without dizziness and falling.”

Remus was admiring his brand new pocket watch, a gift from Harry. It was identical to the one Harry wore – one side told normal time, the other side with hands for close friends. Harry had taken the liberty of adding hands for Tonks and himself already. Tonks was wearing her gift from the Chosen One – enchanted dragonhide boots that gave her magical grace and balance. She was busy changing them pink, then purple, then lime green...

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Hagrid was sitting in front of his fire on the grounds, scratching Fang behind the ears and smiling to himself. He had just unwrapped Harry's gift of a large, giant sized leather bag that was enchanted for featherweight and to hold much more than it should. It was stocked with rope, bandages, potions and ointments, saws, and scores of useful things one could use in the forest when helping creatures.

He was wearing a surprise gift from Luna Lovegood – a giant-scaled silver chain around his neck. It was enchanted by the fairies, allowing Hagrid to spend a most enjoyable time watching formally invisible creatures of all shapes and sizes scampering around the grounds outside his hut.

Fresh snow glittered on the grounds, and Hagrid took in a deep breath, smelling the cold earth and frozen trees. It was the smell of change – soon foretold events would start and the wizarding world would never be the same.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The Weasleys were sitting around their tree in their new home. They had just finished unwrapping gifts from Harry. Harry had a real struggle trying to figure out what to buy for the adults, as he had no idea what their new home was like, and they had a plenty of money of their own now.

Mrs. Weasley was delighted with a large muggle gift basket of gourmet foods. It was really fun to see what muggles enjoyed and thought was exotic. She had to admit the chocolate truffles were to die for.

Arthur Weasley was beside himself. Harry had sent him a muggle child's 'invisible engine' kit. It was clear plastic, came with a manual to explain how the combustion engine worked, and actually moved when a crank when turned. He was sitting on the floor assembling it with wild abandon.

Ron got from Harry a very professional set of goggles for playing Quiddich. He felt a small pang of guilt for sending such a cheap gift in

return. Ginny unwrapped a very nice lap desk, with many compartments, feminine stationary and never-out quills. It was a very lovely gift, and she felt far more than a small twinge of conscience for her snarky gift of the Viagra.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0**

Harry and Hermione were snuggled up together on a loveseat facing the fireplace. Sirius was politely ignoring them and visiting with his mother. They were talking in low, intimate tones, feeding each other fork-fulls of plum pudding, and stopping for the occasional delighted kiss.

“What did you ever give to Ginny?” Hermione asked with a grin.

“I wanted to give her a Weasley Wizarding Wheezes instant cold shower. I wish I did now.” Harry grumbled.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0**

It was a few days before vacation was over. Dumbledore had been gone a few days and his office was empty. Hermione had taken over the dining table with books and parchments to such a degree that the elves charmed an end table into a larger one for eating at.

“I’ve GOT it!” She shouted, looking up. “I know what to do with captured Death Eaters!”

Luna, Neville and Harry came over from their LEGO. “What did you find?” Harry asked.

“This!” Hermione pointed triumphantly in an old book titled ‘*Enchanting For Stasis*’. “Read this, guys, and tell me it’s not perfect.”

“Holy cow” Harry whistled low. He broke into song “Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam...” Hermione giggled. Neville and Luna looked at each other and just shrugged. Some things are better left unasked. “I’ll bring this to Tonks and Remus – I’m sure the Aurors will want to use it.”

## Chapter 16

### ...And More Elves

The students arrived back at Hogwarts with no problems. Harry and Neville popped to Longbottom manor, Hermione popped directly to the station and Luna popped home to her father so they could take the train back with the other students. Harry took Godric's Suitcase with him. They couldn't bring themselves to take down the holiday decorations, and as the fairies were teaching Luna their magic, they wanted them to feel at home, so they all had a festive home to hang out in between school obligations.

Professor Snape did insist on Harry coming down to the dungeons for 'occlumency lessons' the second day back, which Harry agreed to without hesitation. The potions master wanted a chance to stammer out his thanks for a most generous Christmas gift, and apologize for having to continue the 'greasy git' act. Harry graciously waved it off, with apologies of his own for not realizing sooner how valuable the remains of the basilisk were.

Harry sent Winky with his thank you letter to Remus, who sent it back with the happy news of his engagement to Tonks, thanks for Harry's gifts, and the news that the Aurors had indeed taken Hermione's research to heart. All the jailed Death Eaters were now transfigured into 1-foot square cubes of human 'meat', with most of the water removed. It sounded gross at first, but the cubes were humans in stasis – living but peacefully asleep and unaware of anything. They couldn't die, age, dream, or come to harm as long as they stayed in their protective containers. Harry had nailed it right on the head – they were cans of human Spam until transfigured back into human form. Stacked safely in the basement of the Weasley's new home, and unknown to anyone but Arthur Weasley himself, they were totally unreachable by Voldemort, who probably would have no idea what they were if he even saw them.

Ginny Weasley had a tough first full day back to school. Breakfast the next morning she was greeted by the sight of a crowd of Gryffindor girls gathered around Hermione oohing and aahing over an ENGAGEMENT RING. The youngest Weasley stormed up, glared at

the ring and sniffed “tiny stones”, before flouncing off. She sat as far from Hermione as she could without eating breakfast on the floor.

Then somehow Ginny found herself cursed with temporary Veela attraction. It would have been easy to blame the twins, but there didn't seem to be any way for them to have pulled this prank. The fiery red-head found herself followed by boys everywhere she turned. At first it was amusing – even enjoyable. But by noon it was anything but – guys fighting over her, throwing themselves at her, shouting out the most stupid things. It didn't help that Lavender was jealous of the attention and Ron was furious at her. Stupid brother.

She ran into tiny Professor Flitwick and he got down on a knee (so his head was almost level with her knee-cap) and professed his undying love. Then Draco Malfoy, of all people, jumped on the top of the Slytherin table and started singing on the top his lungs “I'm a lumberjack and I'm ok” to the stunned girl. Enough was enough. She fled to her dorm in tears.

Luna smiled, watching the youngest Weasley flee the Great Hall, a small hoard of young men in hot pursuit. “*Mischief managed*” she thought to herself, patting the empty vial of Veela simulator potion in her robe pocket.

**00000000000000**

Harry was leaving potions with Hermione, when he remembered he left a book under his chair. He promised Hermione he'd catch up with her later and ran back. Leaving the classroom again, with book in hand, he heard laughter from behind a statue and was struck with blinding pain.

Collapsing to the ground, Harry's stomach was slashed open as if by a knife. Falling, he sent telepathic word to his three friends and two elves. Just before blacking out, he saw Malfoy stepping out from behind a stature, leering at him malevolently. Harry marveled for the briefest moment of time how much blood was pooling under him.

“So trusting, Potter. Never travel the halls alone when people are out to get you. The Dark Lord will reward me for this...”

Another rule that Malfoy had forgotten, however, was “never waste time gloating”. Harry’s friends all popped in at that moment and struck him with paralyzing hexes. Neville scooped up his heavily bleeding and unconscious friend, and popped him up to the infirmary. Hermione walked up to the frozen Slytherin, murder in her eyes.

“I don’t know why Dumbledore has let you stay in this school, Death Eater,” she hissed in his paralyzed but terrified face, “but they only reason we have allowed it is because you have let the order know about every raid coming up this year. I wonder what your precious Dark Lord would do to you if he knew YOU were the leak?”

Draco started trembling in fear, eyes wide, mouth opened in a silent scream.

Hermione could feel her link with Harry, and knew he was being healed, so she allowed herself the luxury of taunting the evil boy just a moment more. “Not to worry, dear,” she smirked, snapping his wand in two in front of his eyes, “we will take care of everything.” With an angry flick of her narwhal wand, she transfigured him into Spam, and ran without a backwards glance to the infirmary. Luna smiled dreamily, picked up the can of Malfoy, and popped into Godric’s Suitcase with the worried elves.

Luna placed the can of Draco Spam down in front of the foursome’s favorite couch, and thoughtfully looked at it. Winky spoke up nervously “Mistress, can he escape from that?”

The pale witch smiled down at the elves, watching Dobby hesitantly poke the can with his toe. “No, Winky. I promise Malfoy is completely unconscious, with no idea he’s even asleep. Do me a favor, and make a cushion for the top of the can, and oh, how about a beaded fringe? Here’s a good choice for fabric...” she reached into a stack of Winky’s material and brought out a bolt of the most lurid, feminine, tacky pink floral fabric imaginable. “I think he will make a darling ottoman for muddy feet, don’t you?”

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry came to, feeling groggy and weak, his stomach hurting painfully. He opened his eyes, expecting to see Madame Pomfrey’s face

peering down at him, and was amazed to see Sirius smiling down at him instead. He snapped his head back and forth, surprised to see himself in an endless field of soft grass, rolling hills, and occasional trees.

Sitting up with a groan, he grabbed Sirius arm. "Sirius!" he breathed reverently. "Am I dead?"

"No cub," he smiled giving Harry a hug. "It takes more than that to take down a Marauder, though it was quite the powerful and unsporting curse to throw at someone unaware."

"Then where are we?" Harry looked around in puzzlement.

"You are very close to crossing over, Harry. You are here for just a moment. Voldemort has tapped into some very dark stuff to grow stronger. To even it up a bit, it has been decided that my soul is to travel back with you, and live in my portrait. No longer will it be my image, but truly me in the painting."

Harry felt a couple hands on his shoulders and looked in back of him. There were his parents, smiling with love at him. With a strangled cry, he threw himself in their arms, and cried unashamedly.

His parents stood back and poured love into him that was tangible. "Harry, go to Godric's Hollow and fetch our portraits. We have been allowed to come back too. You must be strong and study hard – the time to defeat Voldemort is coming."

"But I was told Godric's Hollow was destroyed!" Harry cried, feeling them slip out of his grasp. Everything was growing foggy around him, and he realized he was returning to his body. "No! I want to stay with you!"

"Get our portraits, Harry, and we *will* be with you. Talk to Hagrid" his mother called as he slipped into darkness again.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The next time Harry awoke, it was to see the nurse bending over him with a concerned expression, like he had come to expect. Hermione

was slumped over in a chair next to his hospital bed, sleeping restlessly, and he winced with pain.

“Mr. Potter?” Madame Pomfrey spoke softly. “How are you feeling? You gave us quite a scare.”

“My stomach hurts, but other than that, I’m ok.” Harry tried to sit up, but failed.

“Please lay down, Mr. Potter. That slashing spell you suffered cut your torso quite deeply – the muscles are still repairing. We did stop the bleeding and restored the blood, but you are going to have to take a couple more days to recover.” She poured out some potions, felt his forehead and adjusted bandages. “Your dragonhide vest saved your life you know.”

As if on cue, the headmaster entered the infirmary, eyes twinkling away. “Ah, Harry my boy, feeling better?”

“Ummm” Harry muttered while strengthening his mental shields. “What happened? Last thing I remember is leaving the classroom, intense pain, and I thought I saw Malfoy laughing at me.”

Dumbledore sat down in a chair on Harry’s other side, glanced over at the sleeping Hermione and raised an eyebrow. “I was hoping you could tell me. All we know is that Mr. Longbottom and Miss Granger here happened to come down the hall at just the right moment to find you before you, ah, bled to death. They have no idea what happened, but ran you up to Madame Pomfrey. Mr. Malfoy has disappeared and doesn’t appear to be in Hogwarts any more.”

Harry didn’t have to fake the look of surprise on his face. “Malfoy has threatened me quite a few times since his dad got arrested. Frankly, sir, I’m amazed you have allowed him to stay in school, as he has proven time and time again to be a danger to the students. Perhaps he assumed he had killed me and ran off to join Voldemort or hide with his mother.” Harry looked away from the headmaster in disgust.

Dumbledore flashed a brief look of anger. *How dare he question my authority? Perhaps Severus is right – too arrogant to be used properly.* He resumed the calm and grandfatherly look as he

continued speaking. "Ah, yes, well I had always hoped that giving him another chance would persuade him to the path of light. I suppose what you suggested is what must have happened to him. Any chance you might have banished him to another dimension with accidental magic or something?" Harry shook his head no. "If you hear anything, please let me know." The ancient wizard stood up, patted Harry's knee and left the room.

Madame Pomfrey straightened out Harry's sheets and left for her office. Hermione sat up and grasped his hand. "Sorry to fake sleeping like that, Harry. How are you feeling?" She gazed into his eyes, pouring love and concern into her look.

Harry smiled at her, giving her hand a squeeze. "Thanks, Hermione. I'm fine – sore and weak, but fine. So what did happen?"

Hermione gave a grim smile and filled him in on the new footrest in Godric's Suitcase. "It's just a good thing we wear our dragonhide armor at all times. If you hadn't wore it, that hex would have cut you" and her voice trembled and broke "completely in two". She broke down crying against Harry's arm as he stroked her hair and comforted her.

"I guess that means I need a new vest?" Harry smiled as impishly as he could manage.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

As soon as Harry was released from the infirmary, he sent a telepathic message to everyone to meet him in Godric's Suitcase. They all popped in about the same time, and Harry went straight to Sirius' portrait.

"Did I imagine that, was it a dream, or was it real?" he asked the painting of his Godfather. Hermione and Neville looked at him curiously.

"It's really me cub. How are you feeling now?" Sirius smiled at him. The portrait *did* feel different to Harry. He turned around and smiled at his friends.

“Malfoy succeeded for a tiny while” he sighed sadly, “and I got to spend a brief time with Sirius and my folks in the beyond. He came back with me, and it’s the real him in the painting now. Before I came back my folks told me to speak to Hagrid and go to Godric’s Hollow to fetch their paintings and they would be in them. I’m not sure what that’s about, but both Hagrid and Dumbledore had told me that Godric’s Hollow had been totaled.”

Sirius looked at all of them with pride. “Luna has been updating me on what’s been happening since the Ministry of Magic. I’m really proud of all of you. Sorry I didn’t know Luna and Nev before I wrote my will” and he winked at them. “Didn’t I tell you Dumbledore was a manipulative jerk?”

Harry smiled grimly. “Accio twin’s vest” he said and gestured toward the boy’s ‘dorm’. Flying through the open door toward him came the florescent spangled and embroidered dragonhide vest the Weasley twins gave him for Christmas. He put it on with a grin. Hey – dragonhide is dragonhide, no matter how ugly.

After chatting with Sirius awhile, Harry sat down on the sofa. “Here, Harry – put your feet up – you look like you need a rest” Neville said, steering him to a seat in front of the Spam footrest. Harry looked at the tacky pink ottoman, resplendent in long pink beaded fringe. It was painful to look at.

“Is that...?” Harry gently prodded it with his toe.

“Yes” Luna nodded with satisfaction. “Here, let me prepare your feet” and she waved her wand over his shoes so they were coated with mud. Harry propped his dripping and dirty feet up on the can with a sigh of contentment. “We were covering our shoes with dragon dung, but it was too hard on dear Winky to get the odor out of the room.”

“Harry Potter, sir?” Dobby tugged Harry’s sleeve and whispered in his ear. “Dobby likes to sit on it and break wind, sir. He was a really bad master, sir.”

Winky probably didn’t appreciate the tea Harry sprayed all over the wall upon hearing that.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry sat alone in Godric's Suitcase. It was 2:30 in the morning, and he couldn't sleep. He paced the floor, trying to form a plan for defeating Riddle. How was Riddle powerful exactly? And what was the new 'stuff' he was 'tapping into'?

Sitting heavily in a chair, he faced his good penseive. Wincing with the anticipated anguish to come, Harry started to extract every memory he could concerning Riddle – each time he had confronted him, and everything he ever heard about him from Dumbledore and others. As much as he didn't want to think about the painful times, it was necessary. The four of them would study the memories together.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry was done with classes for the day after returning to a normal schedule. He walked slowly down to Hagrid's hut with Hermione. He hadn't visited his first friend in a while, and missed him, so it wasn't just that his parents had told him to visit the half giant.

"Harry! Hermione! Come sit for some tea!" Fang jumped on them with wet slobbery kisses, and the giant set to fussing with his large iron kettle and chipped tea pot.

Harry took a peek into Hagrid's thoughts while he set out the mugs. *Blinding loyalty to Dumbledore – gratitude for keeping him at Hogwarts, giving him a job. But why didn't Dumbledore let him back in to continue school after Riddle was found out to be Voldemort? Why such blind loyalty? Strong love and loyalty to me too. Faint hints of suspicion about Dumbledore, but there seems to be tampering in his thoughts.* Harry rubbed his Potter ring, and sure enough – the mantle over the fireplace was charmed for loyalty to the headmaster. He put a goblin shield around it when Hagrid's back was turned. *Ah – the night of my parent's death has certainly been tampered with. I bet I can recover the true memory.*

"How are ya feeling, Harry? What's new with you kids? I haven't seen you in forever!" He beamed at them with his kind beetle-black eyes.

“Well, we’re engaged, for one” Hermione smiled widely, gently taking Harry’s hand and showing off her ring with the other.

“Wha, wh wh, huh? You mean you and Ron, don’t cha?” Hagrid stared at the ring, bewildered.

“No, Hagrid” Harry laughed. “Hermione and I are getting married as soon as we graduate.”

“Dumbledore told me you and Ron was in love” Hagrid stammered uncomfortably. “I had no idea you and Harry had anything going.”

Hermione frowned gently. “Professor Dumbledore wanted Ron to go out with me. I can’t imagine why – we have nothing in common. I always liked him as a friend, but he’s turned pretty nasty this year. He has never asked me out, so I don’t know what all the fuss is.”

“Why would Dumbledore do that?” Hagrid turned his honest face to them, one at a time. “What would he care who you go out with?”

Harry patted Hagrid’s massive arm. “Hagrid, Dumbledore has done a lot of things we don’t understand. When Malfoy attacked me this week, I spent a bit of time on the other side. I met Sirius and my parents, and they told me to visit Godric’s Hollow to fetch their portraits. Dumbledore told me their home was leveled after the attack. But who would have done it – Voldemort was gone. They told me to talk to you.”

“But Harry, the house was destroyed! It was nothing but smoking rubble when I found you!” Hagrid looked confused.

“Then how did Harry survive unscathed when he was in a crib on the second floor?” Hermione asked gently.

“Now that doesn’t make sense!” Hagrid agreed, with confusion all over his face.

“Hagrid, if you trust me, I can fetch the proper memory.” Harry looked at him intently, and the giant nodded in permission.

Harry gently probed deeper in to Hagrid's mind. He found the magical blocks and the planted false memories, and removed them carefully. Hagrid blinked and shook his head a couple times and stared at him with an open mouth. "Oh Harry, Harry I'm so sorry! Professor Dumbledore did this! But why, Harry?"

"What really happened?" Hermione asked, squeezing Harry's hand for support.

"Oh Harry – I remember now. And clear as if it were yesterday!" Hagrid sat down heavily, and scratched his shaggy head. "Dumbledore called me into his office; gave me the address to yer parent's house. Said they'd been attacked and killed. Told me to fetch yer and meet him at the Dursleys. I took a portkey he made, and as soon as I got there, Sirius met me on his motorbike. He was mad with grief, howling like a crazy man about being betrayed. Didn't act like a guilty man no how. We both ran into the house – the house was fine, except showed marks on the wall from a battle." Hagrid got up and grabbed an earthenware jug from the mantle and took a swig. "Yer pa was there on the floor of the parlor, Harry. Dead, with a peaceful look on his face. Sirius was blubbering and holding him. He looked up, with the look of a dead man himself, and said to me 'Hagrid – I as good as killed them myself. I made them use Peter as their secret keeper. He had to of betrayed them to Voldemort – he's the only one who knew where they were. We suspected Moony, and I insisted that they use Peter as their secret keeper.' That's what he told me, Harry. I ran up the stairs to your nursery, and there was your ma on the floor. No signs of a struggle in the room – her laying there all quiet and peaceful, and You-Know-Who's robes and wand laying there on the floor. That's when you started cryin', so I took you out of yer crib. Sirius had covered yer pa with a sheet, and was heading up the stairs to take care o' Lily. He told me to take the bike to get you to safety, and he'd meet up with me as soon as he buried them. I delivered you to Dumbledore, and he left you on the Dursley's doorstep, just like a bottle o' milk. I asked if he really wanted to do that – why with them? Why not ring the doorbell and meet them first? Professor McGonagall argued with him too. He oblivated both of us!"

Hermione and Harry both patted the giant's arms, while Harry glared out the window at the direction of the castle. "Hagrid – he's really

been messing with us. Here – look at this” and he handed him a copy of his parent’s will. The giant read over it, glancing at him constantly.

“Oh Harry – this is bad. This is real bad. What do we do?” Hagrid took another swig from the jug, and brushed a tear from his eye.

“We do nothing for now, Hagrid” Harry sighed. “Pretend you don’t know – everything goes on as before. Don’t look Dumbledore in the eyes – try to avoid him. Just trust me – I am working on some things, and it will work out in the end.”

“Where did you learn occlumency, Harry? Even Dumbledore ain’t that good at it.” Hagrid looked up from the table and peered at the boy.

“It’s a secret for now, Hagrid. Rest assured that I’m preparing to take down Riddle for once and all, and then I’ll deal with our headmaster.” He nodded sagely. “Hermione, my love – would you like to see my parent’s home? I think I can get there using Hagrid’s memory.” She nodded, stood up and linked arms with her fiancé.

Harry concentrated and the two of them popped away, to Hagrid’s immense astonishment.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

The young witch and wizard popped into the front garden of a lovely home. It was a bit larger than Privet Drive, but old and charming, with timber framing and a thatch roof. The snow covered the lawns, so they couldn’t tell much about the landscaping, but Harry noted with satisfaction that it felt like home. *“Dobby? Winky? Could you two please join me?”* Harry sent to his elves, which popped to his side immediately.

“Where are we, Master?” Winky asked, looking at the house.

“I wanted to share this with you two” Harry smiled sadly. “This is my parent’s home. Perhaps this is the house we will live in after graduation.”

“The great Harry Potter brings lowly elves with him at such a special moment?” Dobby gasped, hero-worship all over his face.

They walked up the snowy walk to the front door. Trembling, Harry tried the door knob, which was unlocked. The heavy oak door swung open on rusty hinges, and they were met with a blast of stale, dusty air. A house-elf, old and frail beyond belief, popped into the entry way and met them. "Who are you, and how dare you invade the House of Potter?" he stood as straight and aggressively as he could. But when he scrutinized Harry, he gasped and cried "Lord Potter, sir? Returned after all these years? Forgive an old elf sir – I will gladly punish myself" and he proceeded to slowly totter over to the wall for a good head-banging.

"No – no punishing – please! What's your name?" Harry knelt down to the ancient elf.

"Tippy, sir. My family and I have served the Potters for generations. I'm a bad elf to have you seeing the house like this, but my wife died and I can't get around like I use to." He looked at the floor in shame, tears dripping down his wrinkled pointy nose.

"Tippy, I'm glad you meet you. I'm sorry about the loss of your wife. The place looks fine – it's not like you were expecting company. I was told that the place was burned to the ground when my folks died – I just found out this week that it was a lie." Harry looked around with excitement. "Are you in any shape to show me around, Tippy?" He eyed the elf with concern – he really was sickly looking.

The old elf was crying with joy. "You are kind, Lord Potter. I can manage, sir." He led them into the parlor and insisted on serving tea for the two of them. Winky and Dobby were looking around, sizing up the place.

"Three more cups, Tippy. I want you guys to join me" Harry smiled. "We have a lot to catch up on. It was then Harry glanced up at the fireplace and saw the two portraits of his parents, grinning down at him. "Mum! Dad!" He cried and jumped up to run to them. "Is it really you?"

"Just like we talked about in the beyond, son" his father beamed at him. "I take it you spoke with Hagrid?"

“Yes, Dad. The mantle in his hut had been charmed by Dumbledore for blinding loyalty. Once I shielded that and sorted in his true memories, I was able to find the location here, and gain another ally.” Harry had his hands planted on his own mantle, looking like he would jump into one or the other paintings any second. His mother laughed with a lovely, merry song of amusement, and joined her husband in one frame, to make talking easier on them all.

Harry turned and placed a gentle hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “Please join me?” he asked her, and she got up and walked to the mantle by his side. “Mum, Dad, I’d like you to meet my fiancé, Hermione Granger.”

Lily wiped tears from her cheeks and eyes as James smiled broadly at the nervous young witch. “We have been watching you from the beyond” Harry’s mum sniffed with a tearful smile. “Harry could not have chosen a better witch for his soul mate and life companion.”

James nodded in agreement. “You are the only person I’ve ever seen give Lily a run for her money in charms. Absolutely brilliant! We are ecstatic to welcome you to the Potter family.”

“Thank you, Mr. And Mrs. Potter” Hermione murmured, blushing. “I never imagined I’d meet my future husband’s parents quite in this manner.” She looked at the portraits deeply, noting just how much Harry did take after his father, and how his mother’s eyes were also that mesmerizing emerald green.

After a lengthy conversation Hermione politely excused herself to look to Tippy and see if she could help him. As Harry spoke long with his parents, she sent Winky to Hogwarts briefly to fetch some good homemade chicken soup and warm bread for the frail elf, and insisted on feeding him like a child.

“Dobby?” Tippy asked the first elf of Potter, “Are the master and mistress always this kind? Do any other elves have masters like this?”

“We are lucky, we is” Dobby nodded so vigorously his ears flapped. “Many wizards are changing their attitude because of the great and kind Harry Potter and his Grangey.”

Hermione then transfigured a log from the yard into an elf sized overstuffed chair, and enchanted it to work like a floating muggle wheelchair. “Harry needs you, Tippy, as a member of the family he lost so long ago. No more taxing yourself – you have earned a rest. You are to stay with us, but you must keep your health and strength!” The old elf looked bewildered, shocked, and overjoyed at the same time.

Harry joined them after a bit. “I guess I better charm the house for time saving” he smiled, “before we end up being here a week without realizing it.” He waved his hands around the room in goblin magic. “Hey, Tippy. My folks are concerned about your health. I see Hermione has been taking care of you. But what do house-elves do for retirement?”

“Most wizards just give us clothes when we are too old to work” the elf stuttered fearfully.

“Gosh – none of that – you are a Potter! And no cutting your own head off” Harry winced, recalling Kretcher. A disgusting tradition in the Black household was that any elf that was too old to carry a tea tray had to cut his own head off and the Blacks would mount it on the wall. “Seriously – what did the Malfoys do when an elf gets too old to put in a hard day’s work, Dobby?”

“It never came up, Harry Potter Sir,” Dobby said nonchalantly. “No elf under the Malfoys ever lived that long.”

Hermione gasped in shock, and promptly picked up Winky and gave her a tearful hug. Harry just glared darkly out the window.

“Well, this Lord and head of two houses will start my own traditions then” Harry proclaimed. “You, Tippy, will be in charge firstly of finding another elf to do the work around here. Then, I need you to start writing the history of the Potters as far back as you can recall. I have very few stories of my parents; none of my grandparents; and your family has worked with mine for generations. Any supplies, materials, or research you need, just charge it to the vault. You would be doing me a service I could never pay back, and hopefully can end your days healthy and having felt more than useful.”

House-elves were quick to tears, but it was endearing more than embarrassing. Tippy floated his chair over to Harry, took his hand and wept long and hard. Then, looking at him through glistening eyes, he said “Tippy knows the perfect elf, with Lord Potter’s permission. My granddaughter Cookie is enslaved to the Malfoys – I would do anything to rescue her from that Hell.”

Harry whistled long and low. “OK, Dobby, Winky? Is it legal to take another wizard’s elf? Will it hurt the elf to take them without the master’s permission? If so, how do we get around it?”

“Very difficult without clothes, master” Winky spoke up, frowning and playing with the hem of her apron. “Many wizards put a curse on their elves, so if they leave without their master’s permission, they die horrible painful deaths. I’m sure the Malfoys would do something like that. Clothes cancel the curse.”

“Malfoys use the curses” Dobby winced. “Malfoys use very nasty curses.”

“OK. Lucius and his dear son are both Spam, so that leaves Narcissa to convince to free her elves – all of them. How many does she have?” Harry frowned and sent out an elf message to the Malfoy house.

“The Lord Potter knows elf-magic?” Tippy breathed in a worshipful tone.

“Dobby and Winky taught them, and his friends. They is the Hogwarts founders! They is going to kick You-Know-Who into next week!” Dobby beamed proudly.

“I’ve got it” Harry looked at Hermione, who nodded in agreement with the unspoken but shared plan. “I’m going to visit Malfoy’s Manor and rescue your granddaughter Cookie and the other three, and put a stop to Narcissa ever torturing another elf again.”

**OOoOOoOOoOOoOOo**

At a telepathic signal from Cookie, Harry popped into Malfoy Manor under the invisibility cloak. Although heavily warded, house-elf magic

was able get him through without a ripple. Harry sat comfortably on the floor against a wall in a room that appeared to be an intimate family parlor – not as grand or intimidating as the formal ‘public’ rooms Harry could see through the large doorway. Malfoy Manor appeared to be huge and ostentatious, to say the least.

Narcissa Malfoy staggered into the room, where a very frightened house elf brought her a light breakfast, and left her alone the moment she could. The once proud and beautiful mistress of the manor was a wreck, to put it bluntly. She was sprawled on a sofa, half dressed and unwashed, eyes glazed with borderline insanity. It was nine in the morning, and Harry could smell the firewhisky from where he sat across the room. Her eyes slowly revolved around the room, unfocused and flashing with imagined injustices.

“Draco darling, is that you?” she suddenly called out. Harry slowly looked around to see if she had heard him or something else, but came to the conclusion anything Narcissa was responding to came out of her alcohol addled brain. “Draco, why don’t you contact me? All you had to do was kill Potter and bring his body to the Dark Lord – what is taking you so long? Lucius? You were supposed to break out of Azkaban two weeks ago – did you take our son somewhere?” The ragged blonde rubbed her left arm unconsciously, and Harry could see the dark mark plainly. He started probing her thoughts.

It was disgusting, to say the least, reading the thoughts of a Death Eater who was teetering on the brink of insanity. She was certainly no innocent victim, but a willing participant in Voldemort’s schemes. The woman had no idea what had happened to her husband, or why she hadn’t heard from him – Azkaban was certainly not a secure prison, but quite the joke to the Death Eaters who saw it as a vacation from Voldemort’s control and torture. Narcissa also was confused as to why Draco hadn’t contacted her – Dumbledore had evidently failed to let her know that her son was missing from Hogwarts or that he had attacked a fellow student almost killing him.

Gladly backing out of the woman’s memories, Harry started to plant ideas in her head. It wasn’t hard to do – the woman certainly had no occlumency training, and being so drunk and crazed it was almost like putting her under an imperius, except he was merely putting

suggestions in her head – not commands. Harry had serious doubts about the legality of what he was doing, but as there was no way to trace it back to him, (unless you knew goblin magic), he wasn't going to lose sleep over it.

After a bit of mind probing, Narcissa Malfoy sat up straight and glared around the room. Elves. She hated the sneaky little things. You could never trust them – look what happened with that traitor Dobby. Slimy little creatures – when the Dark Lord came into full power, they would be gone. She knew how to treat the inferior little animals. She staggered to her feet and lurched unsteadily out of the room, returning in a moment with old baby clothes of Draco's. "Cookie! Icy! Kiki! Lolly!" she screeched in a most unfeminine tone.

The four elves popped in before her, faces to the floor, backs tense awaiting punishment for some imagined or exaggerated infraction of their never-pleased mistress. But to their amazement the blond woman flung clothing at all of them and hissed "go – out of my house – NOW! I never want to see your filthy faces again!"

Harry sent the bewildered elves a quick message to follow the mind-link to Tippy in Godric's Hollow, where he would join them in a moment. Before leaving, Harry planted in Narcissa Malfoy's mind the command that every time she would even *consider* having another house-elf in her employment, she would get violently ill. With a grin he watched her run out of the room, hand clamped over her mouth. Satisfied, he popped away.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The four poor elves from Malfoy Manor were in sad shape. Wearing the customary ragged Malfoy tea towels, bruised, beaten, and half starved, they were trembling with exhaustion and fear. The haunted look of shame and defeat hung about them like a tangible cloud, as they nervously glanced at Harry, Hermione, and the three elves in Godric's Hollow.

Harry popped in and removed his cloak, smiling gently at the four that Hermione was making a fuss over. She was handing out bowls of stew, treating wounds and trying to calm and soothe them. Cookie was clinging to her grandfather Tippy, crying piteously. "Who's up for

adoption?” Harry asked cheerfully. The four new heads snapped up with life not seen in them yet.

“Winky, please help these guys get bathed, and come up with some uniforms. NOT clothing – uniforms you can wear with pride. Then if you wish, we can do some vows and you can all join the Potter household.” Tippy, Winky and Dobby all smiled and nodded at them, sending them telepathic encouragement. Stammering gratitude, within an hour the four new elves were fed, cleaned, and wearing clothing much more respectable than torn Malfoy tea towels. Harry and Hermione found themselves now the masters of seven house-elves.

“What would S.P.E.W. ever say?” Harry smiled smugly at his bride-to-be.

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*I've had some requests to explain why Lavender dumped the punch bowl on Ron's head at the ball. Nothing deep – I was imagining she would get fed-up by Ron paying more attention to Harry and Hermione than herself. Most ladies go through great pains to prepare for a ball, and would like to have attention paid to them!*

*There were a couple complaints about Ginny having Viagra. Yes – I guess that was sort of strange, but I'm sure the twins have their hands on all sorts of odd things they are working with to use for WWW – she could have nicked it from them. It was merely a way to show the depth of her immaturity – a way of saying “If you don't want ME then something must be wrong with YOU! I am considering rewriting the chapter where Ginny gives Harry some chocolate frogs spiked with love potion instead – that would add some drama and conflict. But I do hate the thought of ruining Harry's first great Christmas! What do you guys think?*

*Good point was made about Harry still using his Potter ring to see auras when he doesn't need it. Remember – the goblin magic uses finger gestures – the ring can be rubbed very stealthily.*

## Chapter 17

### Winds of Change

Cornelius Fudge, the minister of magic, put his head in his hands and propped himself on his desk. Percy Weasley came up with the never-ending stack of forms and letters for him to sign, and did his usual sucking-up dance. He glowered at him, wanting to beat him like a puppy that just wet the carpet, barely managing to feel a twinge of guilt for thinking that way.

He had just floo'd back from Hogwarts where Dumbledore was even less help than usual. He hated his job – the pressure, the never-ending crowds of ungrateful people, and the constantly complaining Wizengamot. Didn't people understand how much he had done for them? What was with all the constant grumbling? OK, perhaps he could have listened to Dumbledore and that blasted kid Potter and given everyone more time to prepare against You-Know-Who, but what is past is past – get over it.

Fudge stood up and looked out his charmed window, hands clasped behind his back. Nobody appreciated how hard this job was. Even his wife was mad at him. The only person who didn't criticize him was his fool of a secretary, Weasley, whom he had not one ounce of respect for. The door to his office opened, and the aforementioned fool stepped in and stammered "Sir, Madame Bones is here to see you."

"I don't want to talk to anyone right now, Weasley." Fudge said abruptly over his shoulder, not moving from the window.

"I'm afraid you have no choice, Minister" came the professional voice of Amelia Bones, who was standing by his desk, arms crossed and looking displeased.

"What do you want, Amelia? More complaints?" Fudge was practically whining, though he was privately sure it was coming across as a sneer. Percy was standing in the corner of the office with notepad and quill, ready for his command and looking very nervous.

"You've been removed from office, Cornelius." She stood there, strong and decisive, unafraid. He blanched, unwilling to look her in

the eyes. “The Wizengamot voted overwhelmingly to replace you. Please clean out your office – I’ll be back in a few hours after speaking with the Prophet. You – Weasley – come with me.”

With a helpless look at the ex-minister, Percy slumped his shoulders and followed Madame Bones out of the office, pad and quill in hand.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The four founderettes were sitting on the couch, munching popcorn and enjoying the fireworks. Although they were not as colorful as the twin’s creations, they were quite noisy. The firework in question was the temper tantrum Dumbledore was pitching in his office. Shouting and screaming, throwing books and parchments, the headmaster had just received an owl with the news that the Wizengamot had ousted Fudge and replaced him with a witch who possessed a backbone and brain. And without asking him, Albus Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump, and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

It really didn’t matter who was the minister. It was simply that they hadn’t asked him. Ministers come and go – the real power was here in the seat of Hogwarts, tapping off the castle’s almost limitless magic. But how DARE they not get his approval first? And he was the HEAD of the Wizengamot! Why wasn’t he part of the vote?

That thought no sooner flitted through his angry mind when Fawkes gave a trill. It wasn’t the comforting song of the phoenix – more like an avian raspberry. Dumbledore looked over at him and was shocked to see his familiar with a parchment in claw. A parchment that had obviously been on the floor under Fawkes’s stand. He gingerly took the letter by a relatively clean corner and read it swiftly. Then the fireworks really started.

It was a call to an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot, concerning Fudge and his capabilities. If he had only seen it, he could have gone! If he could have gone, he could have decided the outcome! Who had placed it on the floor for the bird’s toilet? Could he have done it himself without realizing?

Fawkes was giving him a way-too smug look. Dumbledore stared at him, pondering if the bird could have hidden the letter himself. No – that was impossible. Phoenixes were very bright and magical, but he couldn't possibly be *that* smart, could he?

Fawkes continued to gaze at him with glittering, intelligent eyes.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Percy Weasley wandered aimlessly around Diagon Alley, still in shock from being sacked. Madame Bones, the new Minister of Magic, was kind, polite, but firm. She had her own secretary, and had no open positions for him at the moment. Fudge never spoke a word to him – pretended he wasn't even there as they both cleaned out their personal belongings. Then Fudge, Dolores Umbridge and him self were escorted from the building into the stark, painful world of unemployment.

Amelia Bones was very clear – Fudge had made too many mistakes and did not have the wizarding world's best interests at heart. She told him that the war was progressing at a dangerous pace, and the Wizengamot felt nothing was being done to find a way to defeat Voldemort. It was obvious to everyone that Fudge's solution to every problem was to discredit Harry Potter in the papers, when he was the only one to have bested the evil wizard in battle four times now. Britain was ready to look for solutions, and was tired of merely assigning blame on brave and innocent children.

The red head sat down heavily on an outdoor café seat and ordered a cup of tea. Halfway through the mug he looked up from his daze and realized he was right across from his brother's joke shop. With a sigh, he drank down the last of his beverage and headed over. It was time for some well-deserved punishment. He had backed the losing horse. He liked Harry – the kid had, after all, saved his father's and sister's life. But he hated the way the boy flaunted authority, never obeying rules. It was too easy to agree with Fudge about the kid – he must have been looking for attention, right? But even as he mulled this over, deep in his heart he knew he had persecuted an innocent victim – one who might be the answer to ending this war.

Percy opened the door and was met by his twin brother's evil smiles. "Looky here, Fred" George smiled with false sweetness.

"Ah – the prodigal brother. To what do we owe this, uh, honor?" Fred gave him a smarmy smile.

"I need to talk to you guys" Percy sighed, defeat written all over his face and body language. "Go ahead – start turning my hair pink now."

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

After a couple of trying hours, Percy left the store a new man. A puzzled, confused, and amazed man, but a new one. After intense questioning by his brothers, they concentrated and seemingly called Harry Potter into the store through telepathy, who then apparated over out of *Hogwarts!*

Potter, he was shocked to learn, was powerful. Very powerful. Kind, good, fair, he gently probed Percy's mind and was convinced of his sincerity. He completely forgave him as long as Percy would go and apologize to his parents, which he was planning on doing next anyway.

Percy Weasley had thought he knew everything. His parents would joke about the arrogance of youth – he supposed they hit the nail on the head with that. He, Percy, was always going to show his dad what a bit of incentive and hard work would do for a Ministry career. He was going to be the one to bring success to the Weasley family, after generations of laughed-at poverty. He was going to be the one to get it right.

The third Weasley son squared his shoulders, knowing that although Harry was young, he was the warrior he would willingly follow into battle. No more hiding behind a desk for him.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Arthur Weasley floo'd home late. By then the news was all over the wireless, and a special edition of the Prophet was delivered, so he had no doubt that his wife knew of Fudges' replacement. He was tired, with much news to tell Molly, and filled with concern over Percy.

Stepping out of the fireplace, he shook his head glancing around the parlor. He still wasn't use to this grand and fancy home. Molly pretended to be thrilled with it, no doubt for his and the children's sake, but he knew she was just as uncomfortable with the posh surroundings as he was. He longed for the simpler days of the Burrow, before Voldemort came back.

Molly heard her husband come through the fire, and practically ran into the kitchen. "Arthur" she breathed into his chest, grabbing him in a bone-crunching hug. "How are you?"

"Much to tell" he smiled down on the top of his wife's head and gave her a kiss. "But first things first – I learned poor Percy got cut along with Fudge – Amelia didn't want anyone that blindly loyal to Cornelius in her office. I'm really worried about him – I can't find him anywhere. I thought maybe I could get him a job in my new office."

He didn't see his son Percy in the doorway, who heard the whole thing. The boy's eyes filled with tears as he approached his father, head bent in shame. "Father" he said softly. "You would still try to find me a job after the way I've treated you the past two years?" Tears slowly dripped down his face.

Arthur let go of his wife, who smiled with understanding. He walked over to Percy, put his hands on his shoulders, and spoke softly in return. "We all make mistakes son. You are a Weasley. If you apologize to Harry, that's good enough for me."

Percy choked a bit. "I already have. He said he'd forgive me if I apologize to the both of you. Please, father, mother, forgive me. I thought I knew everything. I thought hard work and sucking up would get me promotions and success and teach you what is important in life. I was dead wrong. Family is important. Knowing right from wrong is important. A few extra galleons and popularity in the polls is fleeting and means nothing in the grand scheme of things. You work where you work because you love it and you get to avoid all the pettiness I embraced for two years." He kept his eyes down in shame.

Arthur hugged his son firmly, crying into his hair. "Welcome home, Percy."

## **O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

It was a small wedding, held in Godric's Suitcase. Tonks, blushing bride with her natural looks for once, was marrying the werewolf Remus Lupin. The four founderettes stood in attendance as witnesses as the couple pledged their vows to each other, sealed with magic.

"Did you ask Dumbledore's permission first?" Luna asked with curiosity while she was congratulating the new husband and wife.

Tonks grinned and grew a long gray beard. Being a metamorphagus could be so much fun. "Nope. As Remus isn't a teacher anymore, and I don't work for him except in the Order, he has no idea. We figured we'd announce it at the next Order meeting and watch his reaction."

"Um, honey?" Remus looked over and interrupted. "You will lose the beard before tonight, right?"

"My legs match the beard!" Tonks winked at her new husband. Everyone turned an interesting shade of green without the help of metamorphagus talent.

## **O00o0o0o0o0o0o0**

Ron Weasley glowered darkly, arms crossed over his chest. He was sitting in the locker rooms, still stinging from a resounding game loss to Hufflepuff, of all houses. His life was falling apart. It felt like Harry's refusal to play Quiddich this year had jinxed the team beyond repair.

It wasn't just Quiddich, he frowned. It was everything, and he was quite willing to blame it all on Harry. Harry 'oooh-I'm-too-important-to-the-cause-to-play-Quidditch' Potter. Stupid prophecy really went to the Boy-Who-Lived's head. Even if he was the one destined to kill Voldemort, and collect even more fame and galleons for the effort, it didn't mean he couldn't lay back and have some fun and play some Quidditch before that happened.

Harry could have any girl in Hogwarts. He was too thick to understand how the ladies just threw themselves at him. Any girl and the prat had to choose the one he wanted to have fun with. Ron didn't

love Hermione – not in the least. It was fun to rile her up, and he had heard time and time again how muggle girls are easy for a good time. He was mad because he had kept himself mostly away from girls to stay close pals with Harry on Dumbledore's request (and pay check). Harry stole the one girl Dumbledore said he could have. And now they were engaged? At their age? Why – when Harry could be dating super models and playing the field.

During the long hours of prefect duties, Ron never caught Harry wandering the halls, sneaking to the kitchens, or even snogging with his betrothed. What did the geek do for fun?

To make matters even worse, Percy had returned to mum and dad after getting sacked at the ministry. And Harry was in back of his family's happy reunion. Ron rolled his eyes. Perfect Harry. Harry Who-Can-Do-No-Wrong Potter. Oh well, at least Dad got a raise and a bigger office.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry was sitting at the dining table in Godric's Suitcase facing the fireplace where Remus, Griphook, Dobby, and naturally Neville, Hermione and Luna had joined him. They were having a deep discussion over Riddle and his power in a time slowed environment.

Hermione had set a canvas, painted murky black, propped up on the mantle. "This will allow you three to share the penseive memories" she explained to James, Lily and Sirius.

"Right then" Harry breathed deeply, gathering courage. He spilled a silvery, swirling memory from a tiny crystal bottle into the penseive on the table. An image appeared in the blank canvas showing the torch lit room containing the Mirror of Erised. His parents and godfather walked into the canvas, and turned to wait for the rest to join them via the penseive.

The seven around the table leaned forward and entered the memory. Harry glanced around the room, and walked over to where his family from the paintings stood to one side, translucent and ghost-like. "I'm glad we can share this with you, Harry" his mum spoke softly. "I just

wish we could touch you. I do miss not being able to hug and hold you.” James nodded in agreement, and Harry felt himself tearing up.

The group watched a very young Harry talking with Quirrell and the parasitic Riddle in the back of the teacher’s head. Hermione grasped her fiancée’s hand, shuddering at the horror Voldemort had become. At one point Sirius turned into his dog animagus form and boldly walked over to the possessed professor to smell and sniff around. As the young past-image Harry passed out on the stone steps of the dungeon room, the memory ended and they returned.

Everyone sat around the table or stood in the paintings on the wall, stunned and silent for a moment. Harry felt slightly annoyed at the looks of admiration he was getting. Luna broke the silence asking “what happened after you passed out, Harry?”

“Er, Quirrell died from my touch, and Dumbledore conveniently found me.

“Dumbledore knew this was going on, I take it?” James glared darkly from his canvas.

Neville spoke up, sighing slightly. “Yes – I was eavesdropping on his thoughts one day when the headmaster was thinking back about Harry’s first year. He wasn’t aware that Riddle had a body already – he was hoping Harry would let him get the stone long enough to get a body so Dumbledore could be the hero and kill him.”

The people in the room hissed and glared in the direction of the ‘telly’. Remus rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “How did Riddle end up a parasite?”

Harry looked over respectfully at Griphook, who nodded at him. “If I may” the goblin spoke, “we have been researching this too. Between Harry and his companions’ listening in on Mr. Dumbledore’s thoughts and what we have uncovered, we have a rough idea of what the Dark Lord had been doing.”

“What an awful stench he had” Sirius wrinkled his nose in disgust. “I gave him a good sniffing over as Padfoot to see if that could tell us

something more. Ugh – nothing other than the smell of decay and unicorn blood.”

Poor Dobby trembled, but bravely sat (practically in Harry’s lap). He wasn’t sure why he was part of this group of great wizards, but his master had insisted. What could a lowly house-elf ever do against the powerful You-Know-Who?

Griphook continued. “Mr. Riddle was obsessed with immortality even as a student here at Hogwarts. He had turned dark long before graduation. At some time, before leaving school, he had preformed the ritual the ancients called “the soul liberator”. Lily gasped from her painting – she had heard of this.

The goblin nodded at her, impressed that she obviously knew what it was. “The soul liberator is extremely dark – there is no ‘good’ use of this magic. As you all know, when a being dies, they typically pass on to what we call the ‘beyond’. If a being was very unhappy, fearful, or has unfinished work on this earth, they can choose to come back as a ghost. And, as you are aware, in unique cases a soul can inhabit other objects or places – yourselves for instance” and he gestured respectfully to the paintings, “but other’s must place the soul in these objects. Mr. Riddle’s ritual gave his soul the independent power of choice – to go where he chose and inhabit whatever he wished.”

Everyone in the room gasped and paled at the thought. “What are the soul’s limitations?” Hermione asked weakly, feeling more than a little nauseated at the thought of what Riddle had done with his own spiritual essence.

“The soul can not be out of a ‘container’, for lack of a better word, for very long, before it finally fades to the beyond.” Griphook shook his head in distaste before continuing. “We all agree that Mr. Riddle probably spent his 14 years between his first ‘death’ and your first year, Harry, inhabiting snakes, animals, and occasional muggles. He was waiting for his followers to find him and restore him to a permanent body.”

“Why not stay in snakes or muggles?” Sirius asked.

“It is only temporary – the soul eats up the host at an alarming rate – rather like organ rejection in muggle surgery. There must be another body or host close by. The body he had created two years ago was permanent because it was built from his father’s remains, thus giving him a compatible anchor.”

“Why didn’t he just inhabit a painting, like James is?” Remus asked, puzzled.

“It must be a living host” Lily looked sickened as she spoke, “or the soul is ‘stuck’ in that form. Riddle would want to move his soul to a body he could stay in so he can conquer.”

Harry siphoned the memory out of the penseive with his wand, and poured the next one in. “This is the Chamber of Secrets. I’m not bothering with the whole memory – just the parts where I’m actually talking with Riddle.”

Again the group entered – seven flesh and blood, and three ghost-like. They watched the tiny, undersized boy talking with the swiftly solidifying Tom Riddle. Lily and Hermione kept looking over at the carcass of the freshly killed basilisk, trembling with relief over Harry’s victory.

Once again the group left the memory and discussed what they had observed. “This explains a lot” Lily finally spoke, “and it’s very encouraging.”

“Er – how so?” Harry gaped at his mother’s portrait, and most of the room echoed his expression.

His mother gave a grim smile. “Young Tom had made what they call a horcrux. Again – it’s very dark magic, with no light application. He actually split off part of his soul and placed it in that diary. But contrary to rumor, it can only be done once. When Harry destroyed that diary, it left only a partial soul, which is always diseased and tainted. The Riddle you are fighting now is weaker because of it.”

The rest of the time went the same – the group visiting the tragic memory of the graveyard at Little Hangleton, and then discussing

every fact they had gleaned from Dumbledore. After hours, with several breaks for food and fresh air, they wound the meeting down.

“So in conclusion, what are Riddle’s true strengths? What do we have to overcome to kill him for once and all?” Harry looked around the room at each of them.

“Mr. Riddle does possess an extremely strong magical core. He is truly a powerful wizard. Splitting his soul has not diminished his raw power in the least, nor has it increased it.” Griphook commented dryly.

“Evidence indicates he has probably performed rituals that have increased his resistance to magical attacks” Luna added. “If his soul is not as damaged as we suspect, he will be able to inhabit new bodies again after death.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

“He is highly intelligent with no moral ‘brakes’ to stop him from doing anything to achieve his goals” Lily joined in sadly.

“He appears to have the ability to talk with demons and consort with dark beings, giving him access to a potentially huge army.” Remus concluded.

“So” Harry summed up. “We have an extremely powerful, highly shielded, smart wizard that has no moral compass, who might have joined up with demons from another dimension. It’s our job to kill his body and force his soul to the beyond.”

The group all gave a final toast with butterbeer to the final defeat of Riddle before ending the meeting.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

“No, Albus – I refuse.” Minerva McGonagall eyed the headmaster with a steely glare.

“Minerva” the aging wizard glared back, “you forget who your headmaster *and* your leader of the Order of the Phoenix is.” *‘How can she refuse? What happened to her submissiveness? The charms on her desk are still in place...’*

"I haven't forgotten, Albus" she stiffly replied, lips pressed in a thin line. "Perhaps your duty to your students has slipped your mind? I absolutely refuse to get involved with Mr. Potter's personal life. It's bad enough you insist on sending him back to those awful Dursleys every summer. I will not tell him whom he can and can not date or befriend."

The supreme mugwump leaned back in his seat, trying a different tactic. "But Minerva" he twinkled at her in his most grandfatherly of attitudes, "you know I only want what's for the greater good."

"No, and that's my *final* word, Albus". The transfiguration professor stood and walked to the door to pointedly show him out.

With a forced sigh that told the world "too bad you don't see the big picture", Dumbledore got up and left her office. He paused in the hallway, pondering what he could do to place his Boy-Who-Lived closer to willing spies, to insure his compliance. Above his head, near the ceiling, Albus thought he heard a small grunt, but ignored it as probably Peeves. But with a 'thunk', a rock hit him in the head, and he staggered, seeing lights that were not eye twinkles.

"Waaaaa?" Rubbing his scalp under his hat and looking up with fury, the headmaster's jaw dropped open. One of the stone gargoyles that topped many of the columns lining the halls just finished relieving himself. Albus had been the unlucky landing pad for a stone gargoyle poop.

And so the rest of the day went for poor Albus Dumbledore. If he paused for only a moment anywhere near a gargoyle (of which there were many in the castle), he would find himself the target for a granite bowel movement. And if being pelted with rocky excrement wasn't bad enough, the gargoyles were most vocal and creative about what they were doing. Oh – they didn't speak in words – very creative terms for what they were doing would appear in sparkly letters, floating through the air.

"Dropping the kids off at the pool. Making logs. Drop a garden gnome. Riding the doo-doo choo-choo. And most insulting of all – 'taking a Dumbledore'." The supreme mugwump stormed to his office to hide until the hexing wore off.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

“Hermione?”

“Mmmmm?” the bushy-haired witch mumbled with a mouth full of popcorn. The two of them were snuggled on the couch in Godric’s Suitcase, watching the ‘telly’. Dumbledore was removing a rather ugly tasseled hat and replacing it with a rather ugly ice bag to soothe a rather ugly bruise. They had heard about the headmaster’s day being pelted with rock gargoyle offal.

“You did such a super job with what to do with the Death Eaters. Want another project to work on?” Harry gave her a kiss on the cheek and smiled as cheesily as he could.

“Sure – homework is too easy with time slowing” she smiled, returning the kiss.

“We need to learn about the death mark that Riddle gives his Death Eaters. Does it do anything besides act as a portkey and call to meeting. Can it be removed? I’m worried about Professor Snape. Double Agents don’t have a very long life expectancy. His life insurance premium must be killer.”

Harry closed his eyes and followed the path through his scar to Tom’s head. It was 11 a.m., so naturally the dark Lord was fast asleep. Harry started whispering suggestions to him, with the lightest and most subtle of touches. He didn’t want any chance that Riddle would catch on, but he wanted to start to influence him into total and complete trust of the Hogwarts potion master.

Luna stood in back of the couch gathering her school books from the table. She glanced over at the telly, watching the headmaster wince as he moved the ice bag around his head. Sending a telepathic thank you to Hogwarts for her help with the gargoyles, she softly whispered “mischief managed” before popping out of the trunk.

## Chapter 18

### End of semester

The next few months seemed to fly by. Harry and his friends trained hard in Godric's Suitcase with the house ghosts in advanced dueling, and learned many spells that hadn't been used for years. The Malfoy elves, recovered from their previous family, thrived in Godric's Hollow, which Harry visited often with his friends and Tonks and Remus.

Godric's Suitcase was a happy place. The Christmas tree was still up, kept alive by Neville's knowledge of plant related spells, and there was a constant turn over of fairies who all wanted to hang around Luna. Elrind's tribe never left however, and had several births to add to their number. The marbles in the maze were now all enchanted for Spring, glowing pastel colors, and showing off the taste of fresh asparagus, sounding like a bubbling brook swelled with melted mountain snow, and the scent of daffodils and bluebells.

With Draco gone the Slytherins were no where near as aggressive or cocky as they had been. When Narcissa finally discovered her son went missing, it was February, and she was fit to be tied. None of the other students had become Death Eaters (besides Crabbe and Goyle, who frankly were too stupid to worry about), and Professor McGonagall was actually helping several Slytherins stay at Hogwarts to escape their abusive Death Eater parents.

All four of the founder friends were outstanding students now, thanks to time slowing and group studying. Harry's relatively new love of books put an even larger wedge in the split between Ron and he, and the Weasley boy didn't even bother to give him dirty looks any more – he just avoided him completely. Ginny was petty and snarky to Hermione – their engagement did not go over well with her.

Harry started to hone Snape's huge natural talent in occlumency until it was unbeatable in the wizarding world. He spoke often with the potion master and Hermione about removing the dark mark from his arm, and what could be done for repentant Death Eaters. Through Snape's spying and Harry's link with Voldemort many unrepentant Death Eaters were turned into Spam during those months. They both

smugly agreed it was never what Dumbledore had intended for Harry's 'detentions'.

Neville and Harry took to working out, to gain physical strength. They had no idea how long the final battle would actually be, and hoped that youth and fitness would give them a decided edge against the older and weakened Riddle.

There were the occasional raids on muggles and wizards, but every time an attack would start, the aurors and Order of the Phoenix was there waiting for them, arresting or downing Death Eaters and taking few if any losses of their own. Voldemort knew he had a spy in his midst, but could not figure whom. He was leaning toward Wormtail or Bella, but was so filled with paranoia he didn't dare accuse anyone yet.

Amelia Bones was proving to be a great choice for Minister. She immediately started recruiting more Aurors, and raised their pay and benefits. She reached out to the goblins to try and heal old hurts, and hired several to head departments in the Ministry. Madame Bones also worked tirelessly on researching ways to defeat Voldemort, but found that Dumbledore was not very forthcoming with information or help, which had her suspicious.

**0000000000000000**

Dumbledore still called Harry into his office for monthly visits, much to Harry's annoyance.

"Well, my boy" Dumbledore twinkled, pushing the bowl of tainted lemon drops over to him, "how is it going with you?" It was May and the year was winding down. Students were all in a panic of studying, and Harry had plans for the summer on his mind.

"Fine, sir" Harry answered politely, declining the lemon drops and reinforcing his mental shields. "Oh – here are some more lemon-drops. Ron gave me some for Christmas and I really don't care for them." He handed a fresh bag over to his headmaster, who took it with a smile. "Any chance I can forgo staying with the Dursleys this summer? I do turn 17 in a couple months." Harry knew the headmaster would expect him to ask just that.

“Now Harry, you know your Aunt and Uncle really do care for you deep down” he smiled soppily at him. “Anyway, that month spent with them is the last time you can take advantage of your mother’s blood protection. Keep strong while you can – you never know when the final confrontation will take place.”

“Well, starving and beating me is a very strange way of showing they care. I’m glad Hermione is less demonstrative then they are.” Perhaps sarcasm wasn’t the best way to deal with Dumbledore, Harry mused to himself, but some things just had to be said.

The headmaster leaned forward a bit, and Harry could feel the magic bouncing off his shields. “You know, my boy, I’m really quite disappointed at your engagement to Miss Granger. You both are much too young to be considering marriage. I really do not feel she is suitable for you at all.”

Harry raised his eyebrow, and kept his temper well in check. “I don’t think that’s any of your business, sir. You kept recommending Ginny for me, and quite frankly, I feel she is hormonally out of control and quite shallow. As for being too young, the average wizard in Britain marries at age 18, which is what we plan, and 14 of wizard marriages are still arranged by age five, and we are a bit older than that.” Harry enjoyed the mental shouting and sputtering that was going on in Dumbledore’s head after he finished talking.

“Harry, I only want what’s best for you – you know that. We are just worried that after all you have been through, and all you are going to face, a commitment like marriage isn’t, perhaps, in your best interest. Also, you are famous, Harry. There are many great and well established wizarding families around the world that you could align yourself with through marriage for great political or financial power. Did you ever think of that?”

Dumbledore’s wand hand was under his desk as usual, and the spells were just flying and bouncing off Harry’s shields. Fawkes the Phoenix was giving strange looks at the pair of wizards. The young wizard cleared his throat and gave a firm look to his headmaster. “No, Professor, I never did consider marrying for anything but love. I fell in love with Hermione, and I want everything with her that I was denied

as a child – a loving home, children treated fairly, acceptance and affection. I want commitment. The only commitment I ever experienced as a child growing up with the Dursleys was their commitment to hurt me and use me as a house-elf. Frankly sir, I respect you as a powerful wizard and a hero to the wizarding world, but when it came to your decisions about my upbringing, you never checked up on me or investigated any of my complaints. I have to wonder about your priorities and how much you really do care about your students.”

The headmaster’s eyes stopped twinkling and glared at Harry with white-hot fury for a moment. With supreme self-control, he bit back the scathing comments on the tip of his tongue (that Harry was able to enjoy through the wonder of occlumency), and switched back to ‘grandfather mode’. “Very well, my boy” he sighed sadly. “I’m sorry you feel that way. Someday my decisions will make sense to you – you have to understand that at my age I can see the big picture.”

With that, Harry felt the meeting was over.

**OOoOOoOOoOOo**

Luna watched the meeting on the telly between the headmaster and Harry with a shrewd look in her eyes. It was time for another request to Hogwarts for help with a prank...

Harry left Dumbledore’s office shaking his head sadly. Perhaps it wasn’t the wisest thing to do – telling the headmaster how he felt about his upbringing. And he really wanted to lash out, fire hexes, scream and smash things. But losing his temper might cause him to reveal things about himself he didn’t want the man to know. Harry wanted to be in control at all times.

Professor McGonagall came around the corner as Harry headed back toward the Gryffindors tower. She made eye contact with him, and nervously glancing at a nearby portrait, she gestured for him to follow her. His curiosity peaked, he willingly complied.

They walked in silence toward the elderly witch’s office. Harry telepathically asked Hogwarts to stop the paintings from reporting to Dumbledore, as McGonagall obviously was worried about privacy.

They entered the tidy office and she breathed a sigh of relief after shutting the door, gesturing Harry to a chair.

“Harry, I want to say things” she started immediately, eyes wide and brow damp with effort, “but I can’t. There are things happening, people, events... can’t speak!” Harry watched her with alarm – was she having a fit?

“Oh!” he blurted with realization. “You took an oath!” She nodded with palatable relief. “You are trying to warn me?” Again, McGonagall nodded, unable to vocalize against the oath.

The Boy-Who-Lived took a quick reading from her, and saw that his containing of the desk hex had done the trick. Minerva McGonagall did not trust Albus Dumbledore anymore, but he had taken a wizard’s oath from her for her loyalty several years back – to say anything against him would cause her death.

“Stop now!” he cried out – grasping her hand. “I understand! Do not say a thing – it could kill you!” Harry felt panic rising in his chest – that his transfiguration professor was willing to risk her life to simply warn him of her suspicions was beyond comprehension. He gazed into her face, willing himself to speak calmly.

“Professor – I already *know* Dumbledore is not to be trusted. I know everything going on. We will not speak any more of this. Thank you for trying to warn me – it wasn’t worth dying over!” Harry was gratified to see the color returning to her cheeks and her calmness restored.

“You know?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you more, because I don’t want to put you in any more danger – from your oath or from the headmaster’s probing.” Harry shook his head in fury. “How could he demand a wizard’s oath for loyalty – that’s too general and subject to interpretation!”

A single tear escaped the woman’s eye and slowly trailed down her parchment-like cheek. “I loved him once” was all she said.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Albus had calmed down from his meeting with Mr. Potter. It hadn't gone as he wished, but at least he knew the boy would be returning to Privet Drive for the summer. As long as the Order believed there was blood protection there, his boy could be kept safe and contained, beaten into submission, and the Order was willing to keep him there.

He leaned back in his chair, idly sucking one of his beloved lemon-drops. A slight glint of light reflected off one of the portraits, but it didn't catch his attention. He was pondering how Harry could resist all his spells when it came to Miss Granger. He had tried various repelling curses so he wouldn't be attracted to the muggle born witch, many charms to force him to feel attraction to Miss Weasley – nothing worked. Another glint of light caught him, and he glanced at another portrait of a headmaster, but didn't notice anything.

Perhaps Mr. Potter and Miss Granger had bonded somehow. That would make him impervious to everything, including love potions. It was unfortunate – he really wanted to arrange a more politically viable marriage for the boy if he survived. Oh well – no point crying over spilled potions. He caught another glint of light out of the corner of his eye.

This time Dumbledore sat up and really looked at the portraits in his circular office. They were not acting any differently, but every time one looked at him, their eyes twinkled. Just like his own. "All right now – stop it please" he growled with irritation.

The portraits all look at each other with confusion. They had no idea what the current headmaster was on about. Hogwarts had not only charmed the portrait's eyes to sparkle anytime they looked at Dumbledore, she charmed them so they couldn't see it themselves.

"Er, excuse me Albus. What are you talking about?" Former Headmaster Derwent asked with concern. Her eyes were twinkling as merrily as Albus' on a grand day.

"You know very well" Dumbledore glared at her, his own peepers glinting with anger.

"How about cluing us in, then" she sniffed back, and turned her back to the Mugwump.

“Arrrrrrrgh!” Dumbledore slammed his hands down on his desk with frustration. He stormed out of the tower office, hoping a nice lunch would calm him down and give the portraits time to go back to normal. It wouldn’t though. Every portrait in the castle was charmed for eye twinkles for a day. And Albus was the only one who could see it. Oh, Albus had been the victim of far worse pranks, but this was just plain annoying. Eye twinkles was HIS signature effect!

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Exams were over and so was the school year. Neville, Luna, Harry and Hermione were truly looking forward to the summer, and the ghost’s promise of new teachers for them. Next in their intensive training would be wandless magic, animagus training, more spying, and meeting more magical creatures. Hopefully before the summer was over they could finalize a game plan for taking down Riddle for good.

They loaded their trunks and pets into their favorite compartment of the Hogwarts Express and settled into a game of exploding snap, waiting for the train to pull out of the station. Once the train was up to speed, they glanced down the hall for privacy and shut the door. Harry sent Hedwig out the window to Mrs. Longbottom for the summer, and Hermione popped Crookshanks into Godric’s Suitcase, along with the other three trunks. The magical trunk was shrunk down and Winky was summoned to set it up in the room of requirement again. Once the elf sent them the telepathic ‘all clear’, one more glance out the compartment, and they popped right out of the train and into their summer home.

With sighs of contentment, the four unpacked their school supplies, flopped on the couches, and chatted and giggled, waiting for Dobby and Winky’s start of summer banquet. “How long before Dumbledore discovers we disappeared?” Neville laughed.

“I sincerely hope he’s in his office when he does” Luna smiled.

“And that we are sitting right on this couch” Harry continued.

“Munching Winky’s excellent popcorn” Hermione nodded with satisfaction, ending the train of thought.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Ron and Ginny finished their prefect duties as the train sped on towards London. "Where do you want to sit?" the red headed boy asked his sister.

"I dunno. I suppose we could keep an eye on Potter some" she shrugged her shoulders.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I really don't want to, but if I don't report something to ol' graybeard, I won't get my check."

The siblings walked down to the Gryffindor's favorite compartment in the train, opened the door to find it empty. Completely and totally empty. After a short time to gather his wits, Ron felt around with his hands in case Harry was hiding under his invisibility cloak, but it wasn't the case. Harry was just not there.

"Should we go look for him?" Ginny frowned.

"Are you kidding? He is probably huddled in that stupid cloak somewhere laughing at us. Forget him." He glared and sat down hard. "Come on, Ginny – I'll play you a game of snap."

## Chapter 19

### Something Hits the Fan

Luna was lying on the large couch in Godric's Trunk the next day, her head resting in Neville's lap who was gently stroking her long golden/white hair and gently twirling strands playfully around fairies, who were giggling with delight. He smiled at the girl/woman he loved and at the flitting and flying beings that were her constant companions.

"Luna, why do the fairies like you so much? I mean besides the obvious" Neville turned red, stammering.

She smiled dreamily at him, and reached up to stroke his face. "I think you should grow a beard, Nev. It would match your animagus so much better."

He stared down at Luna. Although many things that came out of the gentile witches' mouth was strange, he had learned quickly she only spoke truth. Just how did she know these odd truths?

"Oh – they teach me because I am part fairy. You guys could learn the same magic, but it would take so much longer. It's in my blood you see." She smiled at one female fairy who brought over a new born baby, the size of a butterbean, to show off proudly to the two of them. Mother and child both glowed pale green, with dark sweet eyes of solid black. Neville absolutely cooed with delight, which seemed almost strange coming from the boy who had grown from pudgy and hunched-over to tall, muscular and proud.

"Luna – lets get married after school and have a dozen kids of our own" he gushed. Clapping a hand over his mouth in shock, he looked at her fearfully – he had never meant proposing to be so spontaneous and unplanned.

She sat up and gave him a deep kiss. "Of course we will" she replied simply.

"Um Luna – how do you mean you are part fairy? "Neville stammered when they broke apart. "I mean, there's sort of a size obstacle to

marrying a fairy, isn't there?" Neville's blush turned from embarrassed pink to mortified red, trying not to think of the logistics.

"Father Christmas is my great grandfather" she replied, waving her fingers in a fairy blessing over the tiny baby and mother. All the fairies brought their new born infants to Luna for blessing.

Harry and Hermione, who were trying not to listen in from the table, where they were pouring over books about dark marks and tattoos, couldn't stop themselves.

"Whoa – hold on. Father Christmas is real? He's a fairy? He's your great grandfather?" Harry burst in, excited.

"Of course he's real. My great grandmother was Mrs. Claus the 89th. Santa always preferred witches for wives, although we live such short lives. I see him every Christmas. I'd like to visit his home someday when I finish school." She looked at the astonished looks on her friends faces. "There are many races of fairy – all shapes and sizes. Man and Wizard alike have ignored them, except for children. I guess because fairy magic isn't violent or flashy enough to attract the attention of most grown ups."

"Luna, if Father Christmas is real, how come I've never gotten anything from him?" Hermione asked hesitantly. She didn't want to sound like she was accusing her best friend's great grandfather or anything, but it certainly didn't fit with the myths she grew up with.

Luna smiled gently at her friends. "He only brings gifts to nice children who have been good. There aren't very many kids who are truly selfless and well behaved. It's just not in a child's nature. The 'naughty list', as the muggles put it, is in actuality the 'acts like a typical kid list', and is far, far longer, and no, they don't get coal. His gifts are magical by nature – not silly junk from the store." She looked at Harry thoughtfully. "You were one of the few on his nice list, but Dumbledore's wards prevented him from visiting all those lonely years. I'm sorry Harry."

"Er, the Dursleys would have destroyed anything for me under the tree after accusing me of stealing whatever it was" Harry shrugged

his shoulders. *“Just one more thing to thank the headmaster for when the time came.”* Harry thought with grim amusement.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry looked up from his books. The twins were sending him a telepathic message.

*“Oh IckleHarrykins – better turn on your ‘telly’. Mum just found out Ron and Ginny couldn’t find you on the train, and is contacting ‘Ol’ Whiskers”* Fred sent.

*“Yah – she’s really giving it to Ronny for not saying anything sooner. Mum and Dad are beginning to get suspicious of our two youngest siblings”* George quipped.

*“Are you busy? Want me to pop you over to watch?”* Harry sent back.

*“Oh yes!”* the twins replied in unison. *“Store is closed on Sundays – we were just getting ready to do some very boring inventory.”*

“Telly everyone! Dumbledore is about to get an owl about me.” Harry called out, settling in on the couch. “This should be wonderfully entertaining. Can somebody fetch the twins?”

“Should I start popcorn, kind master?” asked Winky. It was only nine in the morning, but wizard’s eating habits were so strange at this age.

Harry scooped the elf up in his arms and gave her a hug. “We’d love some, Winky. Nobody makes popcorn like you.” It had taken Harry a long time (considering the years they had spent in time-warp in Godric’s Suitcase) to learn to hug and show emotion. His abusive childhood made physical contact uncomfortable and difficult at first. However, with the help of the counseling of the ghosts and the unconditional love of his elves and friends, Harry now found it a delight to hold hands, hug, and show his feelings on his face when the situation called for it. Winky hugged back with delight and set off to make snacks.

“Dobby jealous!” The elf laughed, hands on his hips. He had been sorting through piles of photos Harry had brought back from Godric’s

Hollow, and was sitting in front of the fireplace, organizing and labeling family snapshots into albums with the help of Harry's parents. Harry laughed, reached over and scooped up Dobby, planting a big, wet, exaggerated kiss on his wrinkly cheek. Sirius and James made gagging sounds and his mum gave her musical laugh that Harry so loved to hear.

"Get a room" yelled Neville, pelting them with couch cushions.

"I'll fetch the Weasleys" Luna said, popping off and returning in less than a minute with the red heads in tow.

"Oh Harry – we love what you've done with the place" Fred gushed, looking around at the marble track whirring and clicking around the room. He kept plucking marbles off the track to see what sensations each gave. The smell of a bush of cabbage roses, the feel of sand on a beach, the boom of fireworks ... wonderful stuff.

"And widescreen too!" George admired the spy canvas, peering at Dumbledore sitting at his desk working through stacks of parchment, and thumbing his nose at him. "Too bad there are ladies present. This occasion really calls for a good mooning."

"But isn't it about time to take down the Christmas tree?" Fred asked, as he was promptly and playfully 'attacked' by scores of fairies.

"Naw – the fairies love it too much" Neville answered.

The six of them magically expanded the couch some more and lined up. Winky brought over huge bowls of popcorn. "Cheers!" Fred said, munching away. "Wow – this is great popcorn."

"Winky is the best," Harry nodded.

**Pig, Ron's hyper little owl, flew in Dumbledore's window, and flittered around his head. The headmaster gave the bird an annoyed look as he snatched the owl out of the air and grabbed its letter. Fawkes, behind his shoulder, didn't seem to appreciate the wizard's rough handling of the tiny bird.**

*"I'm going to have to look into the relationship between wizard and phoenix" Harry mused to himself. "Fawkes seems rather unhappy with Dumbledore lately."*

*Dumbledore glanced over the letter, muttered "Whaaaat?" out loud, and read it again. "Harry hasn't been seen since Hogwarts? Impossible.". He stood up and strode to the fireplace, tossing in a hand of floo powder.*

*"Remus – when was the last time you saw Harry?" he asked the green flames.*

*The werewolf's face appeared in the fire. "Do you mean the last time I spoke to him in person? I guess last summer, Albus. Why, what's wrong?"*

*"But Remus, when was the last time you saw him – on duty or around?" Dumbledore frowned with impatience.*

*"My guard duty has always been at night, Albus. I haven't seen him at all since last summer. I assumed he was in bed when I'm on duty."*

*"Have you received any mail from him since school?"*

*"No, Albus, but it's only been a couple days."*

*"Hmmmm" the headmaster muttered and cut the connection. He opened a floo to Moody.*

*"Alastor, when was the last time you saw Potter?" Dumbledore asked, feeling rising panic.*

*"Oh, this is brilliant" laughed George.*

*"...And such clear reception!" Fred agreed.*

*"Shhh!" Hermione elbowed the twin on her right.*

***“Ages, headmaster” growled the mangled auror. “Ever since you strengthened the wards around that house, I told you I can’t see through with my eye.”***

***“But how do you know he’s in there?” Dumbledore was practically shouting now.***

***“I don’t. But it’s not unusual for those muggles to lock him in his room for weeks at a time. I’ve told you how they jail him for years now. I assumed he was locked up. They don’t set foot outside themselves – too scared of running into us I assume.” Moody sounded annoyed.***

***“I’m coming through” Dumbledore growled. “We can apparate over and check on him.” And he stepped through the fire.***

“Whoo hoo!” Neville yelled, throwing popcorn at the canvas. “Hey – how long before he discovers we are gone too?”

“I don’t think he will” Luna mused. “He will attempt to check with Hermione, naturally, and discover she is missing too, but we made it a point for the two of us not to be seen as hanging out with them. The headmaster will check with Ron and Ginny, but other than that, Harry was seen as a loner.”

Neville nodded, grinning. “Well, if he does check with Gran, she will fib for me and say I’ve been home all summer, and can send an elf to let me know if I gotta make an appearance.”

In the intermission while Dumbledore was checking on Privet Drive, Fred and George were inspecting the marble track inch by inch. “Harry, where did you get this? It’s absolutely brilliant.” Fred gushed.

“Christmas gift from Hermione – gotta ask my lady”. Harry grinned, standing up and plucking a glowing lilac colored marble from the track. The taste of cold lemon ice hit his senses. “We can charm the marbles however we want. You are enjoying the senses of summer at the moment.”

The twins looked at Hermione questioningly. “I saw something kind of like this on muggle television before my folks left – some mall in the

States had a huge sculpture made up of track like this, and heavy metal spheres rolled all over it. I recalled the image in Harry's penseive and had Dobby help me build this version. I think the enchanted glass balls are much nicer, don't you?"

"Oh Hermione – I smell a gold mine" Fred sniffed the air with exaggeration.

"Harry, I think we love your wife-to-be. Mind if we steal her away?" George waggled his eyebrows at her suggestively.

"Get off" Harry chuckled, pulling his fiancé over to him. "She's all mine".

"But you can have my idea – I think it would be lovely to see more of these." She told the twins, returning the embrace from her future husband.

***Dumbledore floo'd back into his office, followed by Mr. & Mrs. Weasley, Remus and Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Moody, Ron, Ginny, and a very put out looking Snape. The headmaster conjured up chairs and tea for everyone, and they sat down, with varying expressions of worry on their faces. He tossed some more floo powder in the fireplace and called out to Harry's old real estate agent.***

***"Matilda Malkin? I need information on a house you sold back last summer." Dumbledore spoke sweetly. "Could you tell me where the Dursleys of Privet Drive, Surry, moved to and when?"***

"Hmmm – didn't take him long to find out who sold my Aunt and Uncle's house!" Harry observed, watching with amusement.

***They watched the green fire image of Ms. Malkin's face and she looked down, evidently going through files in her office.***

***"Davis, Demming, Diggory, ah – here we go Dursley. Sorry, headmaster. It was a secure transaction. Once the sale was finalized, the information is wiped from all involved party's minds and the paper work obliivates. I can send over a copy of what little information is in the file. In sales like this I can***

*guarantee that the new home, if we sold it to them, is heavily warded and unplottable."*

*"Please – I'd like to see what you have" Dumbledore sounded very on-edge. A hand reached through the fireplace with a single sheet of paper, which he took. "Thank you, Ms. Malkin for your time."*

*Glancing over the parchment, he passed it around. "There isn't much here. Their house was sold under secret contract to a muggle family late last October. We spoke to them – they never met the Dursleys, who were represented by an agent at closing. The transaction must have been handled by a wizard, but who?"*

*"It couldn't have been Potter, although it smells like him" Snape growled, arms crossed aggressively over his chest, looking bored.*

*"Dear Severus, you suspect Harry for everything. You really need to get along with him." Dumbledore smiled at the potions master condescendingly. Naturally, Harry did not leave the grounds except for one Hogsmeade weekend in November – we have kept a careful eye on him. He had no owl correspondence through last school year, except for you, Remus, and the Weasleys, and a couple short letters to Miss Lovegood, Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom."*

*"Ooooh – forgot about those letters. Maybe he will check up on you two between the letters and spending Christmas with Nev" laughed Harry.*

*"Albus!" Molly broke in with a shocked voice. "You don't mean to tell me you have been reading his mail?"*

*Dumbledore gave her the grandfatherly twinkle 'you-aren't-smart-enough-to-understand' look. "I only do what is necessary to keep Harry safe, Molly."*

*"Yes, but read his outgoing owls? That's completely uncalled for. I can see reading in-coming mail from unknown sources, or*

***checking to see who he corresponds with, but that is unacceptable” Remus growled, frowning at the headmaster.***

“You tell him Moony!” Sirius shouted from the fireplace.

***Dumbledore ignored the protests and grumbles from the Order members in the room. They would get over it – he was, after all, in charge. He faced Ron and Ginny, who were woofing down ginger biscuits and looking very bored with the whole proceedings. “Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley? Did Harry say anything to you during the last year about his relatives moving?” The brother and sister both shook their heads in the negative.***

The headmaster probed their thoughts, which Harry, Hermione, Neville and Luna all listened in on and relayed to the twins. ***“Those disobedient brats! They think they are getting a paycheck from me? They didn’t speak ten words to Harry between the two of them all year!”***

“Gotta learn occlumency” smirked George, after Harry told them what he was thinking.

“It is way entertaining” agreed Fred.

***“Kingsley, please go to the Grangers and see what you can learn from them. Moody, please get the Aurors to track down the Dursleys – it’s very possible that Voldemort killed them while Harry was at school, and kidnapped him at 9 3/4. Severus, any hint of Death Eater activity involved with Harry?”***

***Molly gasped and Arthur looked a pale. Remus and Tonks were both staring at the headmaster with less than friendly faces.***

***Snape shook his head. “The Dark Lord grows increasingly paranoid, and does not share plans with anyone that I’m aware of. He was closest to Lucius Malfoy, whose incarceration has affected him deeply.***

***Dumbledore made another floo connection, this time to Longbottom Manor.***

“Whoops – gotta go. I’ll be right back!” Neville grinned and popped out of the trunk.

***“Mrs. Longbottom?” Dumbledore spoke pleasantly, pouring on the ‘sincere respect’ in his voice. “May I speak with your Grandson?” The elderly witch started, looked behind her for a second, and nodded. Neville’s face showed in the green flames.***

***“Yes, Headmaster?” Neville asked, playing the part of a confused student to the nines.***

“My – this is Oscar material!” Hermione gushed with admiration. Harry nodded in agreement.

***“Could you step through to my office for a moment of your time?” Dumbledore requested cordially. Neville stepped through, brushing garden soil off his hands onto a work apron tied around his waist. He had a couple leaves in his hair, and had every appearance of someone just stepped in from the greenhouse.***

“He’s good!” Fred shouted with admiration.

***“Neville, my boy. Have you heard from Harry lately?” Dumbledore twinkled his eyes at him.***

“Fred, George – how does he do that eye twinkle thingy?” Harry asked.

***“Since school two days ago?” Neville asked in confusion. “No”.***

***“Did you see him on the train?” Dumbledore asked.***

***“Yes – we shared a compartment with Hermione and Luna.” Neville spoke truthfully.***

***“Would you tell me who met Harry at the station?” Dumbledore continued interrogating.***

***“I never noticed – Gran was waiting for me and we left immediately. Is something wrong with Harry?” Neville frowned with concern.***

***“He has gone missing, and his muggle relatives moved sometime during the school year. We are very worried about him. Did he say anything to you during the holiday or school about his family or his plans for the summer?” Dumbledore was getting more and more agitated. Longbottom wasn’t much help, except to confirm that Harry had got off the train at 9 ¾.***

***“Nooooo” Neville puckered his forehead, the very appearance of a dim-witted child trying hard to recall facts and figures. “We had started to hang together early in the year, but once Luna and I started going out, well, we kind of drifted apart. I can’t remember him saying anything about his family.” He looked at the headmaster positively oozing innocence, sincerity, and worry.***

***“My,” Luna mused. “I’ll never try to get information about my Christmas present out of him. He’s too good!”***

The rest of the room nodded in agreement around mouthfuls of popcorn.

***“Thank you, Mr. Longbottom” Dumbledore twinkled at him, thinking to himself ‘I’d better suck up to this one – I might need him if Harry is dead’.***

The meeting in the headmaster’s office came to a close. The last thing Dumbledore did was obliviate the Order members from under his desk, removing the memory of how he handled Harry’s mail. Snape raised his eyebrows at Dumbledore, who simply winked at him. As Severus continually made clear his deep loathing of the Potter boy, Dumbledore didn’t feel it was necessary to mess with his mind. Everyone filed through the floo, leaving Dumbledore alone, staring into space with a deep frown.

***“Creep” Harry hissed, throwing popcorn at Dumbledore’s image on the canvas.***

“That’s much nicer than what I was going to call him” Hermione glared.

“I still say a good mooning is in order” George stated, with Fred nodding in agreement. For the good of all, however, they didn’t follow through with their threat.

Luna gazed at the twins with a slightly raised eyebrow. She wasn’t a witch to hold a grudge – personal insults and hurts rolled off her back. But she wasn’t a witch who could ignore the severe mistreatment of her closest friends. The Weasleys gave her an idea, and she had no doubt that Hogwarts would help her with it.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next day found Dumbledore pacing his office, glaring at his fireplace impatiently. The morning had not gone well – every portrait in the castle, as soon as he came within its sight, would turn around and MOON him! Him! Albus Dumbledore, etc etc etc! And he could not get Hogwarts to talk to him and stop the paintings from their vulgar gestures. It was very difficult to pay attention in his office when he was surrounded by paintings, all ‘cracking a smile’. Even his own portrait was doing it. Could his backside possibly be that large?

Back in Godric’s Suitcase, the four founderettes were sitting on the sofa, smiling smugly at the angry headmaster. On the coffee table was a brand new ornament – a copy of the American Oscar statue, but with one arm behind its back, fingers crossed. Neville was deeply touched and pleased by the award.

***After a bit more waiting, the tall dark figure of Kingsley Shacklebolt strode through the fireplace. Dumbledore conjured a seat for the auror, who sat down and declined a lemon drop. It was getting harder and harder to get rid of the tainted candies.***

***“Any clue from the Grangers?” Dumbledore started in immediately.***

***Kingsley shook his head, trying not to look at the paintings of prior headmasters. Dumbledore sure had some strange things to amuse himself with. “You will probably be interested to hear that***

*the Grangers are missing as well. Their home has been rented out to relatives, who told us they were now in South America doing charity work, and will be gone for the next couple of years."*

*Dumbledore rubbed his hands together in glee. "Fantastic – that will keep Harry away from Miss Granger. She just does not fit into my plans for him."*

*The auror frowned at him. "Let me elaborate, sir. They left sometime last year, possibly the same as the Dursleys. I don't think that Miss Granger is with them. The cousin renting the home assumed she was with them, but we would have known if Hermione flew out of the country. She doesn't have a pass port registered with the muggle government – I checked."*

*Dumbledore stared at the auror in mute shock. He grabbed a file out of his desk and scanned it over. "Her tuition is paid through next year – I can't prevent her from coming back, as she will legally be an adult..."*

*Kingsley continued to give Dumbledore (and the mooning portraits) disapproving looks. "How do you mean she "doesn't fit into your plans?"?*

*Dumbledore looked up impatiently. "I don't approve of Harry's engagement to her. He has too much political clout if he survives Voldemort. I think a union with a powerful family would be much wiser for the good of the wizarding world" he snapped.*

*"Be that as it may, Headmaster," Kingsley sniffed, "I think that it is very possible Harry and Hermione ran off together. Perhaps," he added tersely, "to avoid your meddling."*

*The ancient wizard shot the auror a dirty look. "It's possible. I could believe that Potter's family left without letting him know – they absolutely despise him. But the house was sold by a wizarding real estate agent who was under a secretive contract, obviously from a wizard. Moody couldn't track them. Perhaps Harry is rebelling a bit. Very irresponsible of him." Dumbledore took to pacing the floor again.*

“Harry,” his father called from the fireplace. “I will bet you can get the aurors on your side very easily at this point. I think they are getting tired of Dumbledore’s manipulations, and he can only obliviate so much.”

“I think you’re right, Dad” Harry called over.

***The tall auror stood up stiffly. “All I care is that Voldemort doesn’t have him or her. I think that Harry needs whatever happiness he can find, and if he found it with Miss Granger, I’m glad for the both of them.” He turned and left out the fireplace back to work before Dumbledore had a chance to obliviate him. .***

***Dumbledore ignored the exiting auror. Where was Harry Potter? He glared at the canvas with Armando Dippet, who was mooning him in an extremely rude fashion and giggling like a school girl.***

***“OH WILL YOU STOP IT ALREADY?” the supreme mugwump screamed.***

Luna smiled dreamily. “*Mischief managed*” she thought to herself. “*Thank you Hogwarts – would you please stop the mooning now?*”

“Don’t worry, sir. When the room of requirement is in use, we are moved with the rest of the contents, unharmed to another dimension. Harry tested it before choosing this as our holiday location.” Luna answered his unspoken concern.

“That’s not just a portrait of the headmaster you all love and admire, I suppose” he asked with grudging admiration.

“No sir” Hermione spoke up. “The Baron has been teaching me painting. That is the headmaster’s office, and the source of much entertainment.”

“OK – why? Why the running away? Where are your relatives, Mr. Potter? What are you trying to accomplish, besides sending Dumbledore over the edge with frantic anger.”

“Well, that’s just a lovely benefit” Harry admitted, “and not the goal. He’s quite beside himself to be out of control for once, isn’t he? I left my family for obvious reasons – didn’t feel like being abused for one more summer. The four of us need to study intense advanced magic that we can’t learn at school and we don’t want known – to either Dumbledore or Riddle. My relatives have been safely moved to a secure location, away from me and all wizards, and I’m sure they are very happy.”

“And Miss Granger’s family? You know people are thinking you have eloped.” Snape didn’t manage to totally hide a sneer with that.

“Still engaged, not married, not even living in sin” Harry answered promptly and Hermione flashed her ring in an exaggerated girly fashion. “Her family is doing charity work in South America to keep them safely out of Britain for a while.”

“What are you learning, and why you four?” The potion master was impressed, despite himself.

“Whew – that’s a topic that can take a while” Neville snorted. Snape was impressed with how relaxed the boy looked. There was a time Longbottom couldn’t walk into the potion’s classroom without practically wetting himself. Now the boy radiated power and control.

"Well, sir, we are learning advanced dueling, art, goblin, fairy and elf magic. We are learning what Dumbledore's goals are. Harry is monitoring Riddle's movements. The ghosts will be providing us with advanced teachers in the near future to learn what we need to do and how to do it to defeat Riddle." Luna answered in her mild voice. The witch had a palatable aura of peace and calmness, and was hosting five or so small fairies in her hair. Could she be part fairy herself?

"...And why you four?" Snape asked, all traces of aggression missing from his tone now.

"I think you have probably figured that out by now" Harry answered modestly.

"You four are the founders" he stated, no question in his voice. "Why three Gryffindors? That doesn't make any sense."

Dumbledore told the hat to put us in the wrong houses" Hermione answered sadly. "He wanted Nev close to Harry to keep Harry on a guilt trip, and I was a promised reward to Weasley if he'd keep tabs on Harry. Evidently he saw me at a pre-school meeting and fancied me, even at that early age."

Snape looked at the four sitting around the table with him. He nodded at Luna and said "Ravenclaw", Neville and said "Hufflepuff", Hermione and said "Slytherin" and Harry and said with his old sneer "you always were the quintessential Gryffindor."

The four beamed at him. "Yes, once the war with Riddle is over, we are to replace Albus Dumbledore. In the meanwhile, I think you would like to hear what we've learned about the dark mark." Harry spoke respectfully, not wanted to rub Snape the wrong way.

Hermione grabbed a book off the stack on the table, opened it and pushed it toward Snape. "We suspected the dark marks do a lot more than simply act as a portkey or notification. It turns out that Riddle can use them to punish or give feelings of pleasure simultaneously to everyone marked, and even use them to open a link to another's mind, like he has with Harry's scar. We don't know if he's aware of this potential, and you would probably be safe, as your skills with occlumency would let you know if he was attempting to link with you."

Neville nodded in agreement. "The most insidious aspect of the mark, however, is that all wearing it are truly bonded with the giver – if he dies, everyone with the dark mark dies with him."

Snape stared dully at the book in front of him. He had suspected as much. Voldemort was insane and insanely jealous of his power over his followers. He knew the moment he had agreed to spy for the Order his life was forfeit, but this didn't help in any job satisfaction. The potions master glanced up at the four expectant faces. "I take it you have found something that might help?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, we can remove it from you, or any other willing person who wishes to renounce Riddle. It's painful, but not dangerous with our combined skill. However, you have to choose to serve someone in place of Riddle to do so – the dark mark was given on a wizards' oath to serve Voldemort and to release you without killing you, you have to choose to serve another whose ideals are opposed to the giver of the mark."

Snape had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Any suggestions...?"

Luna spoke up "Harry would be the logical choice. He is the one who will lead us in the final battle. Dumbledore would work, but I don't recommend being bound to him."

"What would be the terms of my bond?" he asked the young wizard, with the air of resignation one associates with a person on his way to the gallows.

Harry smiled gently, with understanding. "Not much. When the final battle comes, you will be incapable of fighting on Riddle's side, but I know you do not wish to. You will fight for the light. You will stop spying for the order immediately. I've been influencing Riddle's thoughts towards you, so presently he trusts you blindly, but I am fearful he could catch on sooner or later. I do not want you to risk your life any more when I'm able to spy much more effectively now, with no danger to yourself. Last of all," Harry ticked off the items on his fingers, "when we take over the administration of Hogwarts, you must treat all students fairly. You have made great strides in this area since we contained Dumbledore's hexes."

Hermione continued, "It is probably life-time bond, which we feel can be transferred to Hogwarts itself when the war is over. However, that would mean you are tied to the school in one capacity or another for the rest of your life. We will research it deeply after the war is over."

With tangible relief on his face, Severus Snape held out his arm with the hated tattoo. "I agree gladly to all of it. And I agree to follow you if you choose to go into politics – you could do the wizarding world a huge favor if you do."

Harry put a hand on his professor's shoulder. "I don't know what the future holds for me. I do understand that so little of my life and destiny is in my own hands, and has been ordered from birth by powers and whims I have little control over. I simply choose to destroy Riddle soon. Let's free you from his tyranny, and you can help us immensely with your experience and skills."

The four drew their custom wands, circling around their potions professor. They started immediately chanting and spelling, speaking an ancient tongue that Snape was not familiar with. Every time the tip of one of the beautiful wands touched his arm, it burned with flame-like pain, but it was a fire of purification, not evil, and touching his very soul. He felt himself drained of poison, weak as a kitten but cleaner than he had felt in years. Trembling with exhaustion, Neville helped him out of his chair and laid him on the sofa where he immediately fell into a deep sleep.

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Severus Snape woke up slowly, groggy and confused for a moment. He blurrily opened his eyes to find himself on a comfortable, incredibly long couch covered with a warm blanket. Feelings of safety, security, and even love, if he dared to name it, flooded his being. *"Perhaps it is a dream. I would like to sleep some more to keep these sensations going."*

"Good morning, Professor" a gentle and cheerful voice interrupted his musings. He could feel the pressure of someone sitting by his head, and a soft hand on his shoulder. Focusing his reluctant eyes, he registered Hermione Granger sitting on the sofa next to him, a hot cup of coffee in her hands. Sitting up, spilling the ugly half-kneezle

cat off of his stomach, he leaned his elbows onto his knees and shook his head a few times.

His eyes then hit on the pink upholstered ottoman sitting by the couch. Snape recognized it as a containment unit for a Death Eater. "Interesting choice of foot rests" he drawled. "Could that be the young Malfoy?" Hermione gave a smug smile.

"So it wasn't a dream?" Snape stared at the clean, unblemished skin on his forearm that once housed the ugly tattoo of the dark mark.

Harry, looking over from the fireplace smiled and resisted the overpowering temptation to laugh evilly and tell his teacher 'you're mine now'. Instead, he graciously greeted him with "you are free now, sir. If you feel up to it, I've got someone who'd like to speak with you."

Gratefully accepting the mug of coffee from Hermione, he took a few sips looking over where Harry was standing, talking with a portrait of Sirius Black. Snape made a slight face – he had hated Black when they were students, and was less than patient with him as fellow members of the Order. On one side of Black's painting was a pair of portraits with James and Lilly Potter, and a forth landscape with a landscape of a country cottage. However, he dutifully got up stiffly, stretched, and walked over to his new bond.

Before his godfather, who watched Snape's face with hesitation and nervousness, or his teacher who mirrored similar emotions could speak, Harry cleared his throat. "Before you guys start, I just want you to know, Professor, that when Malfoy tried to kill me last year, he succeeded for a short time. I visited the beyond, and brought with me the souls of Sirius and my parents. It's really him and them you are talking with, not just a portrait." Harry discreetly left the potions master alone with his former childhood enemies.

Tearing his astonished eyes away from the retreating Boy-Who-Lived-Several-Times-Now, Severus Snape swallowed once and looked at Sirius. The portrait broke the ice by saying "Snape, I've really been a jerk. For years I've kept a silly childhood grudge going when I should have quit and started acting like an adult. You've had the hardest job of all for the Order, and I never made your job one bit easier."

Snape's eyes glittered with repressed emotions. "I too regret my actions and attitudes towards you, Black. We are both better than that. I'm sure your godson informed you how the headmaster was enchanting household objects to determine our feelings? With the hexed items contained, I do not feel the aggression toward you, your friends or Harry."

Sirius nodded without saying a word, but shot a dirty look over at the telly. James broke in "Severus, I have the most to apologize for. I have no doubt that my actions, and my encouragement of Sirius pushed you to taking the Dark Mark as a kid. I was an arrogant git, and by the time I outgrew it, the damage was done. I really am sorry. I really regret putting both yourself and Remus in danger with that huge thoughtless prank as kids." He looked with concern at Snape, Lily holding his hand sharing a canvas.

"Nobody made me take the Dark Mark, which is thankfully gone now" he sighed, showing his newly bare arm to the trio. "My unfortunate upbringing drove me to the Dark Lord, and my own pride dealt with bullying in the worst of ways. I, too, am sorry for going out of my way to provoke you. And although it galls me to say so, you did learn from the whole werewolf experience. It is time to move on."

"Harry speaks very highly of you, Severus" Lilly said. "Thank you for looking out for him, and for risking your life spying for the light all those years."

Snape took a deep breath, and steeling himself, he looked at the Potters. "I've treated your son abominably. Any praise he's given me is totally undeserved. Granted, Albus deserves much of the blame, but I still allowed it to happen by giving in to the residual hostility of our youth."

"Severus, I think I speak for the three of us" Lily looked down gently at him, "when I say that all is forgiven. We will all start over from this day forward. We need to support these four brave children together, each in our own capacity, to end this war as soon as possible for the light."

"Agreed" the black-eyed potions master spoke solemnly. "I look forward to a day without the Dark Lord and his fanatics. I look forward

to the day when the four founders return to Hogwarts to return it to an institution of learning, and I look forward to the day when the Ministry can act with a backbone and a vision. I sincerely hope it will be Harry to do that.”

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Severus Snape, ex-spy for the light and ex-Death Eater for the dark, sat alone in front of his fire. It was a comfortable chair, the best for pensive evenings like this. He gently swirled a snifter of cognac, smelled deeply of the heady aroma, and sipped with appreciation. “*Some things the muggles have really excelled in*”, he mused.

Dumbledore will not be pleased with this turn of events. The headmaster was turning as paranoid and short-tempered as the Dark Lord. For now Snape would pretend life was going on as usual, and that Voldemort hadn’t called a meeting. But only so much time would go by before he would have to admit to his fellow Order members that he was free of the Dark Mark, and no longer a spy. Only so much time before they would have to learn that Harry was the new spy, and a better one than that. And how much time before the whole Order learns that Dumbledore was a bad choice of leader? A very bad choice.

The emerald eyed boy kept bubbling up to the surface of his thoughts. Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One. Godric Gryffindor’s chosen heir. He spent years despising all things Gryffindor, especially Harry Potter, and now he found himself in awe of this young man, and had no doubt he would succeed in ridding the world of the Dark Lord for once and all.

Being a Slytherin through and through, Snape kept bouncing his musings back to ‘what is in this for me’. He was not a lustful man, or greedy for many things, but as an ambitious Slytherin, he was consummately attracted to control and power. Harry had power. Harry could have all the trappings that come with power if he wished. Presently, all Harry wished for was normalcy. Men dream of fame, power, and abilities beyond their peers. Harry had these things and wanted none of it. Harry didn’t want to make plans beyond the killing of Voldemort, because he expected to fail, Snape concluded.

The ebony-eyed potions master sipped his cognac. He would help the young founders in every way he could. And when Voldemort was dead, perhaps he could convince Harry to fill a void that had been eaten into the fabric of the wizarding world for a long time – the need for a strong leader. In the meanwhile, there were some fellow professors and Order members, victims of Dumbledore's meddling, that he could visit. It was time to restore some memories...

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Dumbledore refilled his bowl of 'safe' lemon drops. Popping one in his mouth, he grabbed some parchments and started on some of the never-ending paper work that came with his position. One of his portraits 'hem-hemed' at him.

"Yes?" the mugwump glanced up.

"Professor Moody is about to knock on your door, Albus."

"Come in, Alastor!" he cheerfully called out, carefully adjusting his eye-twinkles.

The deformed retired auror stomped into the office, magical eye twirling in his head, fingers twitching near his wand. Still concentrating on the letter he was working on, Dumbledore gestured him to a chair with a polite "hang on a second, please, Alastor."

With a grunt, Moody plopped down in the chair, scanning the room. He already knew that Albus' lemon drops for company were treated with potion, but Albus was munching on a bowl of candy that was also heavily tainted. Was his friend aware of that? He scratched his unkempt hair and tapped his wooden leg nervously on the floor. Should he say something? It wasn't dark magic that covered the candies he was sucking on but did Albus know?

Dumbledore finished his letter, set his quill down and looked up at his friend. Doing a double-take, he really looked at his friend. Why had he never noticed how attractive Alastor was? What strong shoulders, what lovely highlights glinting off his frizzled hair, and what a roughish look the missing chunk from his nose gave him! Alastor was the one

friend who understood him – who never questioned his authority and respected him.

“Alastor!” Albus choked out, “have I ever told you I love you?”

Moody coughed nervously. “Um, Albus, are you aware that those lemon drops are covered with potion?” He started glancing toward the exit with agitation. Dumbledore, staring at him way too intently, conjured a bouquet of roses and thrust them toward him.

“Do you think that perhaps you feel the same about me?” Dumbledore crooned hopefully, conjuring boxes of chocolates next and humming a Celestina Warbeck melody.

“I t-t-think” Moody stuttered nervously, “that I need Severus to make you something to cancel that love potion on those lemon drops!” He inched toward the door until Albus stood up and flung his arms open.

“Don’t leave!” Albus cried. “Please – just a hug before you go?”

Moody ran, screaming for Snape on the top of his lungs.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The founderettes were laughing hysterically at their headmaster shouting his undying affection at the hastily escaping auror’s back. Gasping for breath, Hermione managed to squeak “what was *that*?”

Wiping a tear from his eye, Harry choked out “those lemon drops Ron gave me for Christmas must have been coated with love potion! I honestly had no idea!”

Neville was rolling on the floor with mirth. Luna simply smiled her dreamy fairy smile. “I’ll bet Ginny did it. You could not have planned that any better,” she stated with approval. “And I had no idea the headmaster was such a romanticist!”

## Chapter 21

### New Teachers and New Relationships

Petunia Dursley paced the kitchen in their new home. Although they had lived there almost a year, she felt the same flush of new excitement each time she stepped through the door. The house was more than Vernon and she had ever dreamed of, and as the effects of the hexed vase slowly drained from their systems, it was steadily replaced with guilt. Crushing guilt. They had done nothing to deserve this generosity from their nephew.

The guilt manifested itself in various ways. For Vernon, he was growing short tempered and angry at everyone and everything. At first he looked for even more ways to hate Harry and the magical world, but when he could not find enough to excuse his fury, he turned on his family. The plus side was that his eyes were finally opened to Dudley's goings on, and he had forced their boy into drug rehab and counseling.

Petunia's guilt came out through constant nightmares. Every night she re-lived every act of cruelty she had foisted on her sister's child. And when she had lived through eleven years and 5 summers of that, she started in on memories of her jealousy and pettiness toward her sister Lily. Yes, it was impossible to fight the hexed vase they once owned, but the vase couldn't create the feelings from nothing – it merely amplified the cruelty that was already inside of the family. Petunia and Vernon needed help, and they knew only one person could provide it. She just hated to ask him for anything else.

With stiff and determined spine, Petunia kneeled in front of the parlor fireplace. She looked up the chimney to see if she could see anything. With a shrug, she hesitantly called out "Harry? Can you hear me Harry?" Waiting a few moments and feeling more than a little silly, she turned and started to walk away when she heard the unmistakable voice of her nephew from the fireplace in back of her.

"Aunt Petunia? Is everything all right?"

She spun around and saw Harry's face formed out of green flames looking at her with concern. With palatable unease and relief, she gasped out "Yes, no... could I please talk with you?"

The green face glanced around the room, nodded, and her nephew stepped out, now much taller and stronger than she last saw. The boy now radiated strength and confidence, and was missing the beaten, sickly pallor they had forced upon him. "What's wrong?" he asked kindly, with none of the hate or scorn she deserved.

She stared at the young man, guilt crushing her now. "P-please, have a seat" she stuttered uncomfortably. She sat down across from him, nervously folding and unfolding a tea towel in her lap, looking at the floor with suspiciously shining eyes.

"Is everything ok, Aunt Petunia?" Harry looked at her questioningly, taking the offered chair. "Do you like the house?"

"Harry, we are a wreck. We love this house. We just can't get over how horribly we treated you. Vernon is dealing with his guilt by lashing out at everything and everyone."

Harry interrupted his aunt. "He's not hurting you, is he?" The boy wore a frown that conveyed concern born of bad memories.

"No – nothing like that. He's angry at himself, and takes it out on those around him. He's drinking, he's spiteful. I can't sleep – horrible nightmares every night reliving how I treated you and my sister." A couple of tears now escaped from her down-cast eyes.

"Have you tried counseling?" Harry asked gently.

"We want to, but where would we go? I can't very well look up a counselor in the phone book and explain we feel awful for abusing our nephew who was entrusted to our care, and has turned out to be the hero of the wizarding world. They wouldn't know whether to lock us up in jail or an institution." His aunt looked at him with hope and desperation.

"You should have contacted me sooner, Aunt Petunia" Harry chided her gently. "How's Dudley affected by all of this?"

“Actually, Dudley is doing much better. Vernon put him in rehab and he’s clean now.” Harry raised his eyebrows. He was aware of Dudley’s dealings with drugs for years now, but didn’t know his aunt and uncle would ever admit he had problems. “He has been learning less violent ways of expressing himself, and he has lost a lot of weight” she concluded.

“Aunt Petunia” Harry spoke softly, “I never wanted you to go through this. I have no desire for revenge or ill feelings. Dumbledore has done a number on all of us. Remember – he’s the one who hexed you guys into hating me.”

At this the dam burst, and his once despised aunt wailed. “No, Harry – it only made hating you easier and justified in our minds. It took what was already there and just magnified it. We are horrible, petty, hateful people and we know it now. I always hated Lily because I was so jealous. She didn’t do anything to deserve my treatment of her. I saw her baby, you, as a daily reminder of what I was.” She sobbed and sobbed as Harry walked over to her sofa and gently held her.

“Aunt Petunia” Harry interrupted her, “yes, you would of resented my mum some. But without that cursed vase in your home, you would have gotten over it. Perhaps you would have favored Dudley over me, and perhaps you would have treated me a bit harsher, but you would not have abused me without its influence. And siblings do not naturally hate each other to the point of violence and neglect – Dudley would not have beaten me like he did without it. The hexing took the faint grumblings in the back of your minds and magnified it a thousand fold. I do not blame you.”

She was at the hiccupping stage now, holding her nephew for dear life. “Harry – I’m so sorry. We are all so sorry. How can we make it up to you?”

“By getting through this” Harry smiled. “I will find a wizard counselor for you guys – one who will look and act muggle so you aren’t uncomfortable, but you can talk about everything with him. Just please try and leave my identity out of it if at all possible.” His aunt nodded in understanding.

“How have you been, Harry?” She asked softly. He smiled encouragingly at her.

“Actually, I’ve been great. I can’t go into details, but I think I’ll be ready to confront Voldemort soon, and I don’t think it will be as impossible as I once thought. Dumbledore has just found out that you guys are gone and he doesn’t know where I am – he’s a tad upset.” Harry grinned to himself. “Oh yah – I’m engaged.”

“W-w-what?” she stuttered again. “You are too young!”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Petunia” Harry grinned. “First of all, arranged marriages and early engagements are actually quite common in the wizarding world. Even though wizards live a very long time, they tend to find their mate early and remain very faithful. Secondly, Hermione and I, besides being best friends since my first year at Hogwarts, have spent virtually years together due to magical time management. We are very aware of what we are doing, but we will not rush the marriage. And you guys will be invited to the wedding.”

Petunia looked down into her lap. “I’d really like to meet your fiancé, Harry” she spoke wistfully.

“I’ll bring her with me when I find your counselor” Harry placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve got to go now, Aunt Petunia. I’ll see you in a day or so, ok?”

With a tentative first hug, Harry broke off from his now calm and hopeful aunt and took the floo back to the suitcase.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

It had been a few days since Harry had been called to his aunt’s home. He had immediately visited Diagon Alley in disguise, found a suitable counselor, and made the arrangements for sessions. Hermione came with him to give the news to his aunt, and they had a surprisingly nice visit.

It was a difficult time for Harry. Although he forgave the Dursleys, he couldn’t forget - the visit with his aunt dredged up a lot of sludge in his battered heart. He had a week of nightmares that were nothing to do

with Riddle, and many things throughout the day would trigger awful memories of his childhood. Sometimes Harry despaired he would never get over the abuse. But Winky would gently wake him every time he had a bad dream, and the Ravenclaw ghost spent many hours talking with him about his childhood, so by the end of that week, he was feeling back to normal and ready to press on.

Now that life was back to summer-norm, the founderettes were finding themselves running out of things they could study on their own with the ghost's help. Thankfully as that feeling was beginning to manifest, they were visited by the ghost of the fat friar.

"How is it going, young masters and mistresses?" The friar eyed them with his typical good-natured amusement. "I will be escorting you tomorrow morning to meet your new teachers. You will be gone from Godric's Suitcase for a few weeks, so please make suitable arrangements." And with a polite nod, he disappeared.

The next day was spent with directions to Dobby and Winky what to do in an emergency, and to take any messages from Snape, Remus, Tonks, Harry's family, or the twins. Any other contacts would probably be a trap. Hermione hugged Crookshanks and scratched behind his ears. Each of the youths packed a satchel with necessities – armor, parchments and supplies, potions, and sentimental items, and waited for the friar to come and get them.

The ghost didn't make them wait for long. As soon as breakfast was done, the fat friar materialized into the trunk with a jovial smile. "Are you ready my friends? The Headmaster is out of the building and the paintings have been ordered by Hogwarts herself not to report on our doings."

The four youths popped out of the trunk and into the hallway in front of the room of requirement. As they followed the rotund ghost down the hall, they noticed all the portraits had their backs pointedly turned to them. "*You can't report what you don't see, I suppose*" mused Harry to himself. "*At least the mooning-charm had worn off long ago.*"

As they walked up to the seventh floor, the staircase they were on suddenly started swinging, as they had the habit of doing in Hogwarts.

The four kids grabbed the rails and held on, looking around with mixtures of curiosity and annoyance.

“The stairs are stopping at that large painting” Harry said as they eyed the new destination the stairway slowed. It was a huge rendition, twenty feet high and almost as wide, of a simple countryside, woods on the left and right and foreground of the canvas, a pleasant clearing taking up the majority of the painting, with a small stone cottage surrounded by trees barely discernable in the far distance. The painting was one of the many that were so high on the castle walls in the stairwell that it was too far to bother noticing, and the absence of people in it made most people ignore it all together.

“It looks like a simple landscape.” Hermione pondered.

“Things are rarely as they seem” Luna mused dreamily.

They jumped back as Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, floated up through the stairs and looked at them.

“Ah, good job, Friar. Nobody has been here in, oh, quite a few years. All right you four – go on in – we have been looking forward to this.” With that, the two ghosts gestured at the painting, which Luna walked right into without hesitation. She stopped and looked back at the remaining wizards with her typical smile, and when they finished gaping, they followed through.

Harry and his friends were standing in a fragrant field. It was summer by the blooms on the gorse and warm fragrant air. Luna bent over and picked some wild flowers and tucked them in her long hair contentedly while the other three shielded their eyes and looked around. Harry looked back where they had come from and could see Hogwarts through the stretchy varnish window, just like at Gringotts when he hid in the painting to hear Sirius’ will. Hermione and Neville joined him gaping out at the deep stairwell with a slight feeling of vertigo and nausea, and watched the fairies that had been in Luna’s hair waving goodbye, flying back to the suitcase. They could see someone several stories below ascending the stairs, so they stepped back quickly and walked swiftly toward the cottage to avoid being noticed.

“Where now?” Neville asked, looking with interest at a shrub. “I’m positive we are in Scotland by the plants here, but exactly where and when I have no idea.”

Hermione frowned at the cottage, deep in thought, and glanced in back of them again at the window to the school. With a shrug she turned again and started to follow Luna, who was walking to the door of the cottage without hesitation. The cottage seemed to be built on the edge of a steep cliff, but the gorse and trees were so thick by the time they got to the quaint little building, they found there was no way to get close enough to look down and get a bearing of their location.

The cottage was stone with thatch roof. There was nothing to give away a time period – the only items in the front were a few chickens and an axe stuck in a log next to a pile of wood. The window to Hogwarts was far in the distance – if someone with hawk-like vision was looking at the painting from the far away seventh floor landing, they might be able to make out four figures milling around a door, but it wasn’t likely.

Luna knocked on the wood door as the three looked hesitantly around. A woman’s voice, musical in pitch, called out “coming!” and they could hear footsteps shuffling on what was probably a dirt floor. The door swung open and a short, plump and frankly adorable witch looked them over, hands on hips and smiling in a most welcome manner.

“Well, well, well! Luna! Neville! Harry! Hermione!” She nodded at each in turn. “We have been looking forward to this day! Come in, come in!” She stepped aside and gestured in.

They bent their heads to duck into the small door and entered. It was a one room affair, with rough unfinished stone walls. The floor was indeed dirt, and a large fireplace was centered on the far wall with a back door next to it. There were a couple rough window openings, with no glass, and the walls were lined with rustic wooden benches to sit on. Three of these were occupied by two wizards and a witch, who were all studying Harry and his friends with great interest. “Please, join us” the plump host gestured to the benches.

Everyone was sitting, Harry feeling very odd and uncomfortable, looking at each other and the wizards of the painting. A tall, broad warrior of a wizard stood up and greeted them. "Introductions are in order. Welcome to the Founder's Hut. I am Godric Gryffindor, the lovely lady whom let you in is my wife, Helga Hufflepuff, and this," he gestured to a lean, dark haired and shrewd looking wizard, "is Salazar Slytherin, and here" motioning to a stately ebony haired witch, "is his wife Rowena Ravenclaw."

If this strange introduction in a strange place had happened a year ago, the four youths would have been dumfounded and frankly, disbelieving. Instead, they nodded politely without a trace of doubt.

"This is an extreme honor" Harry spoke for the four of them.

Hermione agreed. "Hogwarts: A History says that there are no surviving portraits of the founders. Have you always been here?"

Salazar smiled at his heir. "My dear Hermione, we will explain all." He conjured tea in rough earthenware cups and oak cakes for everyone, and continued. "Right, where to begin..."

"This painting, dear" his wife interrupted.

"Ah, yes. First of all, Harry, you have in your possession three portraits that contain the true souls of the individuals – not just portraits – your parents and godfather. It's not unheard of. We are the same – we truly are the founders. Rowena was given a vision of the future, and we realized that through out history Hogwarts would have good headmasters, excellent headmasters and some, er, not-so-excellent. To keep our Hogwarts on track we decided to not come back as ghosts, which can be banished, but to hide in here, giving help where needed."

Rowena smiled at her husband. "And here we are. We get to watch the students and communicate constantly with Hogwarts, and when the need arises, choose our heirs like you, and train them ourselves."

Hermione looked sharply at the founders. "Did you use the soul liberator ritual?" she gasped, recalling the dark ritual Griphook taught them about.

The four founders looked at her with amusement. “No” Rowena stated, “The soul liberator is for giving yourself the power of choice after death, if that makes sense. We knew we were staying here.”

“So” Helga broke in crisply, “are you kids ready to get some real training?” Excited grins lit up in four faces. “Most lessons will be one-on-one, but there will be some group lessons – dueling in particular. Let’s get you settled in.”

With that everyone cleaned their cups with waves of wands which Helga banished to a shelf, and they followed the founders out a back door. The adults gave the kids a moment to enjoy the view – the back garden was maybe 3 foot deep, and as they had suspected, ended abruptly at the edge of a cliff, maybe 100 feet down. Below was a large field, dotted with deep yellow gorse, and ending at a huge castle on a lake.

“Hogwarts?” breathed Hermione.

Salazar beamed at his student. “Yes – Hogwarts as we built her. We felt it was the best way to steer our beloved school back in line when the vision has been lost.”

They stood for a while, gazing out and picking up subtle differences from the school they were familiar with. The most glaring disparity was the lack of people and activity. It was very quiet. Even in the summer at their Hogwarts there would be professors, special studies students from other schools or programs, salesmen, and more milling the grounds, but this was empty. Also missing were the flags and banners that they were use to seeing on the roofs and entryways, and all the windows were either open or with mullioned clear glass – not a trace of stained glass to be seen. The one thing most missing in Harry’s observations was the Quidditch pitch, but he didn’t really expect to see one at this time in history.

The founders led them over to steps carved into the cliff wall, which were wide enough to go down without a feeling of uneasiness. Although it was quite a distance, they covered it quickly, and before they could feel hot or tired, found themselves at the main entrance of their beloved school.

The inside of Hogwarts was far different from modern day. They had a glance in the Great Hall, where the ceiling wasn't enchanted yet, and the teacher's table wasn't on a raised platform. The halls were empty and the staircases still. Classrooms were furnished with simple benches and few tables. At the stairs the men took Harry and Neville and the women took Hermione and Luna to their rooms.

Rowena smiled at the wistful look Neville was giving the departing Luna. "Don't worry, Mr. Longbottom. We will meet again for the evening meal." He nodded and followed Godric and Salazar up the stairs in the direction of their old Gryffindor tower. Sure enough, they came to a door that stood where the portrait of the Fat Lady use to hang, and entered to their old common room. Harry and Neville were gaping – instead of a common room it was one large dorm room now, with the familiar fireplace but three large poster beds, trunks, work tables and benches to sit at. Missing was the comfortable leather furniture and paintings on the wall, replaced with bright colored tapestries that helped to cut down drafts.

"Where do the stairs go now?" Harry asked with curiosity.

Godric shrugged "storage rooms, owlery, observation tower. When we built Hogwarts there weren't as many students as you have now, but we hoped there would be. So we designed her with plenty of space to expand.

"So what we use for the Gryffindor dorm in present day is now where all the boys sleep?" Harry mused. "Where are the girls? And why isn't this guarded by a portrait?"

Salazar, opening a heavy curtain covering a window, said "the ladies live in what you know as the Ravenclaw tower. And with few students and a lack of inter-house rivalry, there hasn't been a need for security yet."

"Who's the third bed for?" Neville asked, looking around for another person.

With a mysterious smile Salazar told them "you will be meeting the rest of the students and staff at dinner, and your room mate should be showing up soon. There are not many, being perpetual summer in

this portrait time but you will enjoy your companions.” The two founders headed for the door, with a cheerful “take some time to unpack and rest – the bell will ring in an hour or so to call everyone to dinner. Please change into your new robes you will find in your trunks.”

The door shut leaving Neville and Harry looking around in a state of mild shock. Neville eagerly walked over to a bed flanking the fireplace and opened the trunk. “Any preference for your bed?”

Harry shook his head and chose the bed next to Neville’s. It was then a handsome youth with an extraordinary ruffed collared shirt under his robes came through the door. The young man had a wispy blond beard, outlandish mustache, and a good natured air about him. With a double take, Harry gasped out “Sir Nick?”

Breaking out in an ear to ear grin, the youth adjusted his collar and winked. “I think the age and having my head firmly attached does give me a more attractive appearance, don’t you?”

“How?” Neville walked up to him, thrusting out his hand for a firm shake. “It’s great to see you like this! But aren’t you from the 1500s?”

Nicolas sat down on the unclaimed bed, and again adjusted his clothing. His habit of fussing with his collar seemed to indicate he was either a touch vain, or the clothing of the era was pretty uncomfortable. “Yes, I do not come from this point in time, but the founders came to the conclusion it helped students to have familiar faces. It also gives us ghosts a huge break to inhabit bodies for a time. Oh you don’t know how I’m looking forward to the feast!” He smacked his lips with the anticipation of a real meal.

Harry shuddered a bit, recalling the Deathday feast he had been invited to in his second year. But shaking himself from the memory, he exclaimed “Brilliant! And it’s neat to see you our age. I take it you still have your memories and skills from adulthood?”

The former ghost laughed. “Do you mean ‘can I still kick your butt in dueling’, young Harry?” Sir Nicolas had taught Harry dueling for many hours in Godric’s Suitcase.

Harry burst into laughter. "As if! Your training in the trunk was excellent, Sir Nicolas, but with both of us being solid, we will see who is the best!" He opened the trunk at the foot of his bed and started to pull out his new clothing, while the three of them continued to chat.

Wizarding clothing wasn't fickle to the whims of fashion as it is in the muggle world, and despite the fact they were a thousand years back in time, their new uniforms were easily recognizable as wizard robes. The outer robes were woven of a coarser material than their contemporary ones, but still black. Under those was a floor length undergarment of finer linen, dyed purple. The outfit was finished with soft leather boots, cuffed at the calf, matching belt, and a black wool wizard's hat.

"Um, H-H-Harry?" Neville was stuttering, which was never a good sign.

"What's wrong, Nev?" Harry was beginning to remove his muggle clothes, fold them and place them in the bottom of his trunk.

"Did they give you underwear?" Neville was pawing through his trunk in a near-panic.

"Nev, my pal, we are a thousand years in the past. We have a choice of either making sure we never fall in an undignified way, or we can keep our solitary pair of 'y-fronts' clean and serviceable with magic. Guess which I'm going to do." Harry nodded, waving his wand over his lower region. This pair of under shorts was going to hate him by the time the summer was done.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The first dinner was exciting for the founderettes. Instead of four huge house tables and a teacher platform, there was one large table in the center of the room that everyone sat at together. Harry, Neville, and Sir Nick joined the girls, and were amused to see them in outfits identical to their own. "*So, did you get any undies in your trunks?*" Harry sent to Hermione with a mischievous grin. He was rewarded with a gasp from Hermione who was furiously blushing and refusing to meet his eyes.

*“Honestly”* Luna broke in telepathically, *“we have heard of cleaning charms”*.

Salazar broke out in a hearty laugh. “That does seem to be the topic of most students’ first concerns when they get here. Sorry to disappoint you children, but undergarments will not be invented for quite a few hundred years yet, and we are all privy to your inner-mind conversations.”

Everyone burst into loud chortling. Introductions were made around the table, and the youths were delighted to find they were sharing summer lessons with not only the youthful Sir Nicolas, but also Anne Washbourne, the quiet future ghost of Ravenclaw. Staff included a younger Bloody Baron Augustus Schacht and ‘Fat’ Friar Charles. The biggest surprise, however, was a lovely lady sitting between the Baron and Friar. She was middle aged, with fascinating features that seemed to be more African than English, except her skin was gray and mottled, just like the rough granite walls of the castle. She was introduced as Lady Hogwarts.

“You are the manifestation of Hogwarts soul?” Luna asked with interest.

The gray lady nodded and spoke in the most mesmerizing voice. It was ancient yet young, gravely and musical, rich and deep with wisdom. “Yes, Luna. I choose to take this form when heirs need training. It makes it easier to interact and bond. It’s one of many reasons Headmaster Dumbledore is not finding me as responsive to his needs lately.” She gave a wry smile.

The dinner itself was rather bland when compared with contemporary fare, but satisfying. There was rustic bread that was much different than the bread the four were use to eating, and fresh, sweet, creamy butter and milk. The main course was a hearty stew, and there were some seasonal fruits to end the meal. The food was served by a couple of house elves in person, and Harry was pleased to see how at ease the elves were – chatting and interacting with the wizards and witches with no sign of the forced humility of Dobby’s peers. They even wore clothing – real clothing, not the crazy patchwork of the free elf, or the hideous towels/pillowcases of the ‘owned’ elf.

After dinner the foursome spent a lovely evening in the courtyard with the now solid ghosts (who would on occasion have to leave to answer a call to Dumbledore or other present-day duties), the founders and Lady Hogwarts, as they called her. Rowena was playing a lute and Salazar accompanied her on recorder, while Godric sang in a rich baritone a song about Merlin and a battle he fought against three harpies.

It felt strange to be on a first-name basis with a founder, but Hermione was slowly getting use to it. She worked up her courage for a question after the song was over. "Salazar, why are we taught that you left the school because of conflict with the other three?" she asked him.

He snorted, polishing the instrument with his robe. "That rumor has been going around for centuries. I'm not sure who started it – Almand the Addlepat I think. It was probably his idea of a prank, which was taken as truth by a not-so-bright under-secretary. Helga rolled her eyes in agreement. "Nope – I've never fought with my friends and wife any more than any other wizard."

"Do all the Headmasters have access to you through this painting?" Luna asked, looking contentedly at the sunset.

"No, Luna" Rowena answered. "Lady Hogwarts works the stairs to gain access to us only on our wishes or permission. Only heirs and headmasters who ask for help and are deemed worthy are given our assistance. When a headmaster goes astray without repentance, he certainly will not see us. We give warnings through Lady Hogwarts, and if unheeded, she starts to withdraw from a headmaster in error."

The most wonderful day ended as the sun dipped behind the forbidden forest, and the four new/old students went to their respective dorms to bed. Tomorrow training would begin in earnest.

## Chapter 22

### Luna

Luna woke the next morning with the deep chime of a bell. *"I wonder what ever happened to the bell tower?"* she mused. It sounded so right in the castle. She dressed in her new robes, listening to Hermione's endless questions to Anne, their roommate, as they readied for breakfast. Although Anne was a student, like they, she was there for companionship rather than learning. One can only learn so much after three hundred years.

In her solid form, Anne, the ghost of Ravenclaw, was still pretty quiet. She had a sharp, intelligent brain that soaked up information and she never embarrassed herself by talking too much or saying the wrong things. In life she had died only a few short years after graduation from Hogwarts in the 1700s, in a curse breaking gone wrong.

Although not a chatty companion, she was sincerely liked and appreciated by both Luna and Hermione. The three found they could discuss any subject at length, and her years as a ghost gave her wisdom and insight rarely found in people their age. It also helped that none of the three were the type of girl to chat about men and fashion all night.

"Anne, how can a painting hold this much magic – to house the founder's souls, give the ghosts bodies, keep house elves going...?" Hermione was grilling Ms. Washbourne with intellectual intent.

The Ravenclaw mascot smiled. "This isn't a painting we are in. The painting is merely a doorway to another dimension. You are correct, Hermione, that no painting can maintain that much magic."

The first breakfast was a plain affair – porridge, tea, and fruit. "I didn't know tea was drunk in Britain a thousand years ago" Luna said, daintily biting into a pear.

Godric smiled. "Not to muggles – wizards discovered it centuries ago and imported it by magic."

Rowena met Luna's eyes. "Today we will study privately with our heirs. Luna, you will come with me."

Luna nodded and stood up, following the founder out of the Great Hall. She saw Neville following Helga and gave him a warm smile as she headed in a different direction. They ended up in the old transfiguration classroom brightly lit by sun streaming in the windows, and sparsely furnished.

Rowena eyed the pale girl over. The Ravenclaw founder was not the warmest of people – slender, pretty, and proud, she radiated the same strength and wisdom all of the founders did. She had a no-nonsense air about her – the kind of teacher that expects students to grasp a concept the first time. But she also had a face that lit up like a sun rise when discovering a new bit of knowledge, and a hunger to see a puzzle through to the end. "What would you like me to teach you, Luna?" she asked her intently.

Luna contentedly clasped her hands in her lap, gazing calmly at the witch. "Healing during battle, intergrading my fairy abilities with witch abilities, wandless and silent spell casting, better dueling, becoming an animagus, and most of all, what your vision for Hogwarts is and where have we currently gotten off course." She stayed silent after that, content to wait for the founder's reply.

Rowena smiled. "Let's work our way down your list then" and she picked up book and handed it to her.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Luna had been learning fairy magic ever since Christmas before they went back in time. She missed Elrind's tribe and the various fairy friends that appeared in the trunk. Fairy magic wasn't all that different, she supposed. It was just far more emotion driven than wizard, goblin or elf magic. Most wizards just were not able grasp it, or if they could, they had an even harder time changing back and forth.

Fairy magic was born of deepest love – the love of friends, family, things tangible and things not. The best healing magic was that of the fairy – it not only repaired the body, but the mind and heart as well. A good medi-witch could mend the broken bone or severed nerve, but

they never worried about the battle trauma that comes with it. Fairies had the ability to heal the whole person.

The magic of the fairy did not use wands – it flowed constantly from within. The more adept Luna became, the easier it was to control. She was continually radiating peace, love, and contentment, which were soaked up by any good beings in her vicinity. At times of healing it would pour out of her, focused, visible and mighty, but typically it was an aura of quiet magic, invisible or barely discernable to most.

The fairy creatures she and her necklace-wearing friends would interact with were not particularly special – they were magical creatures like Hagrid loved but they occupied another dimension. Rowena and she would ponder the creatures for hours, borrowing one of the friends' chains for Rowena to wear, but they hadn't found a practical use for that talent yet. They were not dangerous or even aggressive creatures – just different.

Luna would smile a little sadly after those sessions. Why did everything have to have a practical use? Practical as in “what can it do for me?” Many things just exist and Luna loved them for simply existing.

She ended up with many lessons taught jointly by Rowena and Helga, who was the healer of the founders. Luna soon grew to be a powerful healer that rarely needed a potion to aid in her ministrations.

**oOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

“Today” Rowena looked at Luna with her piercing eyes, “we are going to discover your animagus form.”

“I will be a gray goshawk” Luna answered simply.

“How do you know?” Rowena frowned, examining her strange but extremely competent student. “That bird is native to Australia – do you have family from there?”

Luna smiled her dreamy smile. “I’m not sure about my family, but the fairy in me can see the animagus in a wizard, even before they discover it.”

The raven haired witch looked at her in even more surprise. “You never cease to amaze me, my fairy friend. That is an interesting talent. Tell me, can you tell if someone is an animagus, or just has the potential?”

Luna shook her head. “No, Rowena. Animagus is an innate ability – if a person chooses to go through the discipline to attain their form is not discernable.”

“Is it as rare a talent as they say?” Rowena got her well-known investigative look to her eyes.

“No, actually about half the people I meet have the potential. I think few actually become their animagus form because it is hard to give yourself over to something so primal. Much safer to stay human and in control, I think.” She nodded, more to herself than to Rowena.

“Have you ever transformed?” When Luna shook her head ‘no’, Rowena looked at her in shock. “Why not?”

Luna smiled at her. “I didn’t want to learn it any quicker than my friends. It seemed like something nice to share.”

Rowena shook her head a few times. “Fine. They should be starting this week themselves. Would you like to start with the first steps?” She gathered a large parchment which spelled out many meditative steps and incantations to make the transfer for the first time. Luna, however, shrugged in agreement, stood, and transformed into a gray goshawk.

The founder gulped and stared. There, on the ground in front of her, on her first attempt, was one beautiful bird. She was the palest of gray on the head and breast, with dove-gray wings and back. The feet and beak were vivid orange, with a sharp black tip to the bill. The eyes were large, black and expressive. It was almost as if a gentile doe-eyed mouse had turned into a winged predator. As with her human form, the Luna-hawk had an outer-worldly dreaminess to it, as if it was barely attached to the mundane earth. “If you would like to fly, please stay close to the ground until you get a real feel for it” Rowena muttered weakly.

The goshawk nodded, spread its wings and gently launched. Staying within 6 feet of the floor, the bird swooped and glided around the large class room, and then landed in front of her teacher, transforming back.

“That was much easier than I thought it would be” Luna observed. “But I had been thinking about it a very long time.”

“I can’t wait to tell Salazar and the others. Why don’t we go and help your friends – knowing their forms will make the process that much quicker” Rowena got off her bench and ushered Luna to the door. “By the way, what will your friends be?”

Luna smiled. “Neville will be the most beautiful wolf, and Hermione an adder. I think I will not say anything about Harry’s.”

Rowena looked at her. “Um – Neville’s wolf is logical – wolves are known for their strength and loyalty to their mate and pack. Hermione’s adder follows through with being Salazar’s heir, although I’m not sure it’s what she will be expecting. Can I have a hint on Harry’s?” She was practically burning up with curiosity.

“He becomes a very brave creature” the blond witch smiled.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Luna did not do very well at divination, although it was one of Rowena’s specialties. After struggling for weeks, together they came to the conclusion that it was part of Luna, like healing, and if she just relaxed and let her fairy blood work, she could get very useful and valuable insights into the future. Tealeaves and crystal balls were shunned by both of them, but the long meditations favored by Rowena left Luna bored. Rowena learned to let Luna sense what and when she chose, and taught her how to use or ignore glimpse of the future.

The founders quickly learned that Luna was not the warrior of the group. She could duel passably, which meant on the level of most aurors, but she just wasn’t aggressive. The group decided to teach her to shield, dodge, and use her healing during battles on her companions. Sometimes you just can’t flog a dead horse.

A typical group session of dueling would have the four students against one or more founders. They quickly learned how to share the battle, each using their own strengths and covering each other's weaknesses. Where Harry and Neville both favored sword in one hand, wand in the other, and Hermione tended to duel with two wands, Luna found she was most effective with her wand transformed into a long staff that she could both battle and cast spells with.

Watching Luna in these group 'battles' was a joy for the founders. Although she didn't cast many offensive spells – most of what she did involved shielding the others, healing the others on the fly, radiating positive emotions, and helping stamina – but the spells she did throw at the 'enemy' were deadly in their own right. She had an ever growing arsenal of fairy/wizard spells that dealt with the mental or physical health of her opponent. Luna found she could paralyze, which differed from *Petrificus Totalus* as in the victim was rendered limp and comatose – not stiff and awake. Another spell Rowena and she had perfected was a sweet little number that could temporarily dampen a person's link to their magical core, turning them squib for a short while. Its only drawback was it took immense concentration and a bit of time to cast.

Together Rowena and Luna were working hard on a spell to remove dark magic from a person. In theory what they had could work, but they lacked a suitable guinea pig to practice on, and were worried it could be fatal.

The most interesting part of 'Luna the Warrior Fairy', however, was when the group discovered that quiet and strange little Luna Lovegood was the prankster of the founderettes. And this came to light when during duels, her friends would be mortified to find themselves 'Accio undies' by the girl, or hexed with uncontrollable hurling, or worse yet, find the dueling area suddenly filled with adorable baby kittens. No one could duel and risk hurting a cute little kitty, could they? Naturally, that only worked against light wizards. It wasn't much of a threat against Riddle unless he had an allergy to cats.

“So tell me, Luna” Harry started in after one lengthy training session where Godric ended up with huge floppy clown feet mid-battle, tripped, and was vanquished, “you wouldn’t by any chance know *who* was behind all the pranks against the headmaster last year, would you?” Harry grinned at his fairy friend.

“Hmmmmm – mooning portraits, pooping gargoyles,” Hermione started to tick the tricks off on her fingers with a huge smile.

“Don’t forget the office full of lemon drops” Neville added, cornering Luna with an admiring smile.

Luna merely smiled her dreamy, other worldly smile and blinked her large blue eyes slowly. “Mischief managed” was all she would say.

## Chapter 23

### Neville

Neville, the morning after they arrived, watched his fiancé and two best friends walk away in different directions of the castle with a sigh. “Cheer up, my dear” Helga patted him on the arm with affection. “You will see them during meals and group lessons, and I promise to keep you so busy you will not miss them very badly.”

He smiled and followed the plump witch to her classroom. “What’s first?” he asked with curiosity.

“Dueling – magical and with swords.” Helga had her hands on her hips and was sizing her new student up. “We don’t know how large or just how soon the final battle will be. Rowena doesn’t feel it will be a long war – the downfall of either Riddle or you four will determine the outcome of the wizarding world for years to come. Our job is to get you all the training you should have had during your time at Hogwarts.” With a sad sigh, she reached on to a table and picked up a couple of swords. “Say hi to your companion for the next year.” And she tossed him a long, graceful but sturdy double-edged blade.

### OoOoOoOoOoOo

The next year did indeed fly by. Neville went through a few growth spurts, and the constant exercise and workouts grew him into a massive bear of a man. He had no idea how Helga remained so curvy (ok, plump) – she was a taskmaster with a sword. Although Neville was now 6’ 4”, with his dark brown hair tied back in a pony tail and a thick beard to complement the look, and although he was gaining in grace and skill, his teacher could best him every time.

Neville worked hard at soundless magic, but for the most part would fail miserably. He was simply a fighter of strength, and Helga had to concentrate on this and not what she would of hoped he could do. Not that it mattered – he was such a powerful fighter and wizard, that even if an opponent heard what spell was being cast, chances are they wouldn’t be able to withstand the raw force in back of it.

The same for wandless magic – Neville was just too powerful for subtlety. When relieved of his wand, he was a giant of strength in wrestling, swordplay, and brute force. So the dueling time was spent on focusing his power and increasing it, and the founders decided to leave the more cerebral fighting to Hermione and Harry.

Neville did have a spectacular talent with animated transfiguration. That was a skill Helga happily honed in her young charge. In the midst of a fierce duel the young man was able to bring a table, chair, or wall scone to life and allow it to fight along side. The mere shock value alone would aid in battle without a doubt.

He had an entertaining duel with Luna one afternoon. It started when the two had met in an empty classroom for a quick snog after lunch, and were discovered by their mentors. For ‘punishment’ Rowena and Helga thought a one on one duel would at least work some frustration out of the young couple.

Luna stood, lightly balanced on the balls of her feet, and transformed her wand into a staff. Neville grinned and did likewise. They circled each other a bit, making slight ‘fake out’ moves with their staves, but mostly feeling each other out. With a sudden arc of her staff, Luna cast a strong shield the same moment Neville jabbed out and cast an *Expelliarmus*.

The shield faded and Neville cast once again, this time throwing a ball of fire toward his fiancé. With fast grace she easily rolled out of the way, stood and spun, swinging the six-foot wand. Neville barely dodged a blast of fairy-colored magic of unknown nature. The angle he flinched at allowed him to recover instantly, crouch and fire again, this time charming the floor with ice. Luna slipped and landed hard on her leg with a grunt.

The witch wasn’t disarmed, so Neville, grinning in a feral-like manner, circled cautiously while Luna held him at bay with her wand now shrunk back to its original size. She healed her leg with her left hand, sized him up, and with a vicious swipe enlarged the wand back to a staff and knocked Neville’s feet out from under him. The boy was flat on his back, hitting his head on the floor and seeing stars, but on the way down managed to fire off a body bind on his fiancé.

Neville recovered from his grogginess to find himself pinned by the shoulders by his smiling lady who had been enervated by their teachers. “Are you ok?” she asked with a playful smirk. He gave her puppy dog eyes while rubbing the back of his head, which is never fair. Luna comforted him with a good long kiss right there on the floor.

Rowena and Helga were standing in the doorway the whole time, snickering and making observations until the duel ended. Once the couple’s kiss had gone long enough, they looked at each other with amusement, conjured twin buckets of ice water and promptly doused their students. Neville charmed a table to chase their two teachers shrieking down the hall.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Helga entered the classroom and gave Neville, who now towered above her, a giant hug. “How’s my favorite pupil this morning?” she gushed.

Neville returned the hug with a grin. His Gran was never one to display affection, and simple hugs were probably the thing he missed the most about not having his folks. “I am fine, favorite teacher.”

“And what would you say to some animagus training today?” The plump witch’s eyes crinkled with delight as she read the excitement on his face. But Neville’s face fell after a moment.

“What if I don’t have an animagus form?” he asked hesitantly.

“Not to worry, dear. I have it on good authority – you fiancé – that you indeed do. Turns out fairy and those of fairy ancestry can just see those things. All we have to do is show you how to become what is already there. The figuring out *what is* your form is would have been the most difficult part.”

“Do you know what I am?” Neville asked with growing anticipation.

“Yes. What do you think you will be?” Helga teased.

“Something strong, loyal... I dunno. A badger like you?” He searched her eyes for hints.

“Try again, dear” she giggled with a flattered laugh.

“I’ve been told I’m growing bear-like. Could that be it?” Neville looked positively hopeful.

Helga was positively mirthful. “OK, Neville dear, here are some basic rules of animagus. First of all, it will be an animal, bird or creature from your native land. I’m afraid the Longbottoms are about as British as you are going to find, so it will be a creature from the UK. Second rule, it will not be a magical creature – no griffons, grims, unicorns, dragons, etc. Leave that stuff to the Witch Weekly fan fiction contests.”

“Hmmm – geese mate for life. And they have quite the bite on them...” Neville was pondering, not looking very happy at the prospect of becoming a common barnyard goose.

“You are a wolf, dear.” Helga patted his arm, grinning at his palatable relief. Wolves use to be native to Britain.”

It took Neville a couple days, but he caught on “splendidly” according to Helga. He was a magnificent shaggy black wolf, with yellow intelligent eyes and heavily muscled. “I can’t wait to run with Moony!” Neville crowed.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Neville looked around the classroom one morning. The swords and barriers were gone, so dueling wasn’t on the agenda for today. Helga bustled into the room a moment later with a large caldron, the size of a child’s bathing tub, planted with various plants. “Any idea what we have here?” she grinned mischievously.

“Um” Neville furrowed his brow and started ticking off on his fingers “*Crataegus monogyna*, *Centaurea scabiosa*, *Lotus corniculatus*, *Anthyllis vulneraria*,...”

Helga broke out in gales of laughter. “Yes, yes. But come here and look closer, dear.”

Neville obediently left his seat and walked up to the planter. He peered around the stems and roots, and jump back with a start when he was confronted by two black glittering eyes watching him back.

“A garden gnome?” He looked at his teacher in disbelief.

“Yes sir” she smiled. “Tell me, Neville, what you know about our friend here.”

“Well, er, they are considered um, pests” Neville said, looking with apologetic embarrassment at the small gnome. “Wizards are always ‘de-gnoming’ their gardens.

The gnome in the tub gave a bit of a giggle and came out from between the plants. He sat himself on the edge of the container, folded his hands over his little brown body and watched Neville intently. It was a typical gnome, brown, wrinkly and rather featureless – best described as a potato with limbs.

“Are they sentient?” Helga challenged her student.

“I suppose so – they speak, they build burrows...”

“What damage do they do?” Helga asked him.

“Not much unless you are trying to raise strawberries” Neville answered, staring at the gnome. “They are quite addicted to them.”

“OK, Acorn my friend, let’s teach Neville here about the *real* gnomes”. And to Neville’s shock and delight, the 8” high potato-man stood up, and with a nod transformed into the classic gnome of muggle folk-tales – pointed hat and all.

“How do you do, Neville Longbottom?” the small man greeted Nev with a bow, and quite the sincere twinkle in his eye. “My name is Acorn, tribe of Oak.”

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Neville left the classroom shaking his head in stunned disbelief. It was one of those ‘who knew?’ days. Gnomes were very much like the

creatures the muggles liked to write stories about. Powerful in nature-based magic, the gnomes kept to themselves for the most part, helping animals, creatures, and plants behind the scenes. They would occasionally make themselves known to certain witches and wizards, usually to assist wand makers or potion masters.

He spent the rest of his time in Hogwarts past learning to speak gnome, and learning gnome magic that included the speech of animals and sentient plants. Thankfully wizards never treated gnomes worse than being flung by their legs, which they happened to enjoy. If he ever saw a gnome getting abused, well, it wouldn't be pretty.

One of Acorn's favorite ways to teach was to have Neville transform into a wolf. The small gnome would then climb on to the wolf's shaggy back, and they would wander the Forbidden Forest for days at a time. The wolf and gnome became strong friends, student and teacher, sharing the wonders of the creatures and plants.

Hogwarts Herbology in current time was mostly based on plants that Wizards needed. There was the occasional lesson on what plants to avoid when exploring, but it was typically lessons needed for potions, healing, or other plant-related magical careers. The gnomes had a deep love and appreciation for how all plants interacted with each other and the world.

The fact that some plants were sentient was at first mildly disturbing to Neville. But Acorn taught him that the only plants with a soul were some older trees – the intelligence and awareness came after years of life. It wasn't limited to certain species, or even all of one species. You could have a sentient oak right next to a soulless oak of the exact same age. There was no murder involved with harvesting leafy greens, saplings, or soulless trees. Even the gnomes didn't understand why some were sentient and some weren't.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Acorn sent Neville to the forest early in the morning with the instructions to talk with a grove of sentient birch trees by a far stream. He expected him back by nightfall with a report on why more than

one tree developed thought and any observations they wished to share.

With a goodbye kiss to Luna, the young man transformed into his wolf form. His fiancé strapped a small pack on his back that held quills, ink and parchment. With a dry lick to her cheek, he was off. She watched him lope off toward the wood, wishing she could join him as a hawk.

Neville loved to explore as a wolf. Smells were so vibrant and told him so much. He could track where a rabbit had crossed the path he was on the night before, tell that the larch tree he was approaching was dying of a fungal infestation, and that centaurs were in the forest about a mile due east of his location. The information his lupine nose gave him made him feel almost blind in his human form.

Enhanced sense of smell made communication with people a whole new experience too. He could smell when Harry was angry, Hermione was frustrated, and even pick up when Salazar was feeling sneaky. As a wolf Neville found himself with a whole new level of understanding his wife-to-be. Merely by smell he learned that Luna did not enjoy it if he repetitively stroked the back of her hand, that she really, really loved having her neck kissed, and when content she gave off the faint scent of daffodils.

Hearing too was so sensitive now. Neville wondered how pet dogs could stand being in a room with a loud TV or stereo. As a wolf he could pick up the faint rhythmic booms of an unknown axe-wielder several miles away, or the heavy splash of a leaping trout at the far end of the lake. Wolves could also hear farther up and down the sound spectrum, and Neville was surprised to learn that some magical creatures he previously thought mute actually communicated simply in a different frequency.

Enjoying the landscape flying past his quickly running paws, Neville skidded to a stop right outside the grove Acorn had sent him too. With a nervous whine he could smell something new and foreign to his senses. There was somebody or something in the trees, and it wasn't human, centaur, fairy, or gnome. Something he had never met before.

Creeping stealthily around the edge of the glen, Neville the wolf filled his olfactory glands with the new smell. Pricking his ears forward

toward the being's location, he could hear nothing beyond the whisper of a faint breeze through the leaves of the birch trees centered by the small stream. He lay down in the shadow of the wood to wait and see what would walk out of the pale slender trees.

A musical laugh, bubbling like the stream at his paws, feminine as the swaying, slender birches, reached his furry ears. A lush form stepped out from the trees and Neville sprang to his feet with a startled growl. The woman stopped a couple yards from him, laughing with mirth. "Are you going to stay like that, or could we talk like people?" the strange being asked him seductively.

The woman in the glade was certainly not human or even fairy. Neville searched his memory for what she could be, but found himself confused – as if he *should* be able to recall, but the memory was blocked. He gazed at her with his wolf sight. She appeared to be young – barely adolescent, in the bloom of her fresh maturity. Her skin was mottled and patterned, resembling the bark of the trees she had just left and her hair was thick and shiny, moving with a life of its own. She was graceful and fluid in her movements, and her face showed a quick and flirtatious smile. She possessed eyes that reflected fire, mischief, and a blatant disregard for consequences. She wore, well, nothing.

With a gulp, Neville reverted back to his human form.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Back in the castle, everyone but Neville was eating lunch. Luna suddenly jerked her head up, facing the forest and gasped out "wood nymph!" She quickly stood to make for the door, but Helga put a hand on her arm.

"Sit down, Luna. He must do this on his own." The founder of Hufflepuff was sympathetic but firm.

"But a wood nymph!" Luna looked panicked for the first time that Hermione or Harry could ever recall. "Do you know what a wood nymph *does*?" she cried, tears welling in her eyes.

Helga put a comforting arm around the trembling witch's shoulders. "You will see why he is my heir, Luna. You will experience the loyalty of Hufflepuff."

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Neville trembled as the being approached him. Now seeing in color, for some reason it didn't bother him that the girl's skin was tinted like the birch trees – silver, green and marked with small lines. He tried not to look at her nakedness, but he found his eyes drawn to her form repeatedly.

"You find me attractive?" she smiled encouragingly. "We could live here you know. You could get to know me very well, my man-wolf."

Neville scratched his beard nervously, and found himself backing away. It sounded so tempting. What a breathtaking woman-girl. Such an enchanting glade – the trees and her beauty just sang to him. But didn't he have something he was supposed to be doing?

She paused so he wouldn't run. "You mean you don't think I'm pretty?" she crooned, slowly batting her eyes in forced submission and play hurt.

"I-I-I think you are beautiful" he breathed heavily, and took a step toward her.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

A lone tear escaped Luna's eye. She did sit back down, but her face was still turned toward the forbidden forest, and her heart was checking her mind-link with Neville in a panic borne of fear.

"What is a wood nymph?" Hermione asked quietly as she moved to the other side of her best friend and wrapped her arms around her in support.

Anne and Lady Hogwarts looked at each other with sad sympathy. The former ghost spoke after a moment's pause. "wood nymphs are very self-serving creatures. They are born of ancient magic – some

say they are sentient trees that have taken the next steps in their evolution. Some say they are the off spring of man and fairy.”

“Why are you so scared, Luna?” Harry asked her intently. He had never seen his friend anything but unflappable, and it shook him down to his toes to see her so distressed.

“They delight in seduction” Luna murmured. “It is nothing to a wood nymph to take a man, use him, and destroy him. Sometimes their victims disappear, sometimes they return – empty husks forever trying to find their former lover again. They go insane then die.” Another tear joined the previous one, and she buried her face against Hermione’s neck.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The nymph ran a finger down his chest seductively. “Come with me” she said. It was not a request.

Neville had taken the first step toward her, but abruptly stopped. Something wasn’t right. Although every pore in his being screamed at him to gather the girl in his arms and never leave the glen of birch, he didn’t reach for her and frowned with concentration.

“I want you,” she said, clearly annoyed. Never before had a man resisted her. Never before had a man even tried to.

“*What am I forgetting*” the young man pondered. He closed his eyes to think without distraction. The girl was breathtakingly beautiful, but she wasn’t going anywhere. “*But maybe I’m insulting her? What if she goes?*” He could hear her plainly stamping her foot with impatience. Now that wasn’t becoming. Then he remembered another girl – recently? A year ago? Years ago? A girl with long silver-blond hair and strangely bulging blue eyes. A girl of purity, beauty, strange wisdom, and calm peaceful love.

“Luna” he spoke reverently out loud. His head whipped around toward the castle.

“What’s a Loona?” the nymph spat angrily. “Are you coming with me or not?”

“No” Neville turned from her and headed back toward the castle.

She ran to him, grabbed his shoulder and spun him around with unnatural strength, her anger pouring off her in waves. “Come with me NOW!” she demanded, spit flying from her lips. Her spell of attraction abruptly ended – Neville found her repulsive.

Neville grabbed his holly and amber wand, transfigured it into a staff and struck the ground. Magic rolled off the staff in concentric ripples, filling the glade of enchanted birch as he spoke an ancient Celtic spell of binding.

“NOOOOOOOO” she shrieked, falling to the ground and clawing it to keep from going back. Invisible forces dragged the young nymph screaming to the tightly grouped trees. The trees moved, trapping the girl in the center of them until the branches blocked her from Neville’s sight. With a final, extremely unfeminine shriek of fury, the girl was silenced.

Without a backwards glance Neville resumed his wolf form and ran back to the castle on swiftly flying paws.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Luna collapsed limply against Hermione. “He’s back. He’s coming back” she said softly. Gratefully she dried her tears on the corner of her outer robe, and resumed her normal peaceful demeanor.

“What happened?” Hermione asked with typical curiosity.

“The nymph has been banished to the fairy dimension” Helga stated with pride. “My children are loyal.”

## Chapter 24

### Hermione

Salazar inspected his student's parchment. She was obsessive when it came to facts, he decided. He simply asked for a paragraph or two on what she knew of sword fighting and wizards, and the next day she brought him a good 7 feet of everything she could glean from the library on the subject.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" he smirked at her.

With a yawn she nodded that she had, but as to how much sleep, Salazar probably didn't want to know.

"I think with you I'm going to start with the less academic subjects – see if we can loosen you up a bit." The wizard conjured a thin, flexible sword out of the air and placed it on the table in front of Hermione. "Let's start with this..."

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Salazar Slytherin had taught many heirs over the past thousand years. But Hermione was quickly growing into one of his favorites. At first he was afraid she would be too stuffy and bookish, but she had the hunger for knowledge his wife Rowena possessed tempered with his own thirst for justice and seeing a story through. Although she would pretend not to, she had a deep-seated love of working in the background to get a goal accomplished. OK – she loved manipulation, just like he did.

Hermione was a quick study with the sword and magical dueling. She had grace and balance, and was a natural with a blade. She had an intellect that gave her the ability to recall dozens of spells for any situation, and the cleverness to choose the right one every time.

Wandless magic was apparently a huge challenge to Hermione, although Salazar was suspicious that she spent quite a few late nights practicing when she should have been sleeping. Surprisingly, however, she had a real talent for wandless spell casting. He was training up one powerful witch, despite her lack of wandless talent.

He was delighted how Hermione took to two wand dueling. Not many witches seemed to have an aptitude for dueling in general, and to find one that could handle two wands at once was a joy. At first he was caught off guard by the strangeness of her second wand that could split a spell without command, but they quickly developed a style of fighting that used it to perfection. Salazar pitied the boy that tried to take advantage of a daughter of hers in the future.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Salazar was grilling Hermione one warm morning while they strolled the grounds near the lake.

“Your parents do not know of any magical people in your ancestry?” he asked in disbelief. “It’s just very unusual for a witch of your power to be muggle born. Muggle born witches and wizards are common, but one of your talents, no.

“Salazar,” Hermione spoke slowly and chose her words carefully, “is there any truth in the stories that you wanted to kill all muggle born magical folk?”

He stopped at the edge of the lake and gestured for her to sit with him. With a dark look in his eyes he finally spoke. “Hermione, I never wanted to kill off *anyone*. I did, however, strongly advocate training the muggle born in a different school for their first year. It was not prejudice – it was a matter of safety for both them and us. Until recent history muggles tended to persecute wizards – it was very difficult at times to keep the wizarding world and Hogwarts a secret. The muggle born, as you are well aware, have a lot of catching up to do when they discover our world. A year away would keep them from the Malfoys of your time, start their training and teach them the background and history they need to fit in better. Also, there are a large number of muggle born wizards and witches who decide they don’t want to live in our world – I felt it would be better to have them in a different location until they make up their minds. Again, it was a security issue, for their safety and ours.”

She nodded in agreement, recalling the difficulties people like Harry had when they discovered they were wizards mere weeks before

school started. “How did you get used as the justification of racial cleansing then?”

“How does the teachings of Jesus line up with so many of the wars done in the ‘name’ of Christianity over the centuries?” Salazar challenged his student. “I don’t see anywhere in the New Testament that promotes bloodshed – rather I see ‘love your neighbor’ in it. Kings and rulers have always found an excuse to give license to their greed – the more famous that excuse, the easier it is to sell it to the masses. It doesn’t matter if they correctly quote or represent a celebrity – it only matters that they can twist and use it for their own purposes.”

Hermione frowned, thinking about what he was saying. “What about the Chamber of Secrets – what was that about?”

Salazar snorted in derision as he leaned back on his elbows, watching a hawk flying over the lake. “Why do you think I built the Chamber of Secrets? How many bathrooms do you see in Hogwarts currently?”

Hermione gaped at him. “Oh my – why didn’t I figure that out? Without plumbing, how would you have made the entrance? But who built it then?”

The founder sat up, cross-legged and looked at her with a sad smile. “Whom do you think?”

“Riddle?” she gasped. “Could he have been that powerful as a student?”

“Yes and no” Salazar smirked with an air of melancholy. “The chamber was there all ready, but with another entrance. He discovered the room while exploring – he was always skulking around for secrets. It was just a large empty room under the castle, and nothing more. Riddle added the décor and the basilisk, which he had obtained as an egg and raised down there. Being an heir to a founder, which sadly *is* true, he discovered quickly he could communicate with Hogwarts and had her create the unique entrance from the bathroom, and seal up the old one. Hogwarts soon after realized he wasn’t a nice person and stopped communicating with him. Lady Hogwarts

told us what she had created with Riddle, and we decided to leave it as-is – the basilisk could not escape and we didn't have the means to kill it. We were not aware of the journal he had created.”

He stood up and brushed some grass off his robes. “All right, my student, today we are going to start working on your metamorphmagus form. As an animagus form is rare, metamorphmagus forms are even rarer.”

“How do you know I am one?” Hermione asked, standing beside him. “I thought a metamorphmagus was someone who could change their appearance without spells.”

“Hrump” the wizard snorted. “Your wand was the first hint. Yes, changing one's look is one kind; another kind is a witch or wizard who can change back and forth between certain magical beings. In your case, a mermaid.”

They had reached the edge of the lake. Hermione had to fight a sudden impulse to throw herself in to escape the madness. A mermaid? Her? She had seen them during the fourth year Tri-Wizard Tournament. They were not exactly the pretty creatures of muggle fairy tales. But that would explain the strange wand that fit her so perfectly.

“All right then – the first couple of times you will probably need your wand. After a few transformations it will feel ‘natural’ and you will need to only ‘think it’.” Salazar drew his wand and demonstrated the spell on him self and Hermione was surprised to see him transform into a merman and change back. “You will want to do it right by the water's edge – merfolk do not breathe out of water. Once you transform, swim over that direction” and he gestured due east, “and through a stone arch. You must swim through that arch. Spend long enough with the people of the lake to learn their language, ways, and skills.” He watched her transform, gave the briefest look of longing in his eyes at the still lake, and headed back to the castle alone.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Hermione spent the next few months with the Merpeople, only visiting Hogwarts on occasion when homesickness for Harry and her friends

got too much. She had no idea where the mermaid in her blood came from, but it was surprising to learn how powerfully she had denied her attraction to the water all her life. It was most likely that she wasn't related to the waterfolk in any sense – just spiritually as she was with Salazar.

Merfolk or Merpeople were deep, and not just in the water. They were deep thinkers, but extremely trusting – almost childlike. Their magic was the magic of element, and besides a natural communication with water creatures, they could command the very water itself to be a powerful weapon. They had a culture that spanned centuries beyond that of man or wizard, and were proud, powerful, and talented.

The pride of the merfolk, however, wasn't arrogant like the centaur. They loved their lake, loved the art they created with their hands, and loved their people. War or aggression with other beings had occurred very few times in their history – Wizard, goblin and elf alike seemed to ignore the people of the lake, and they were more than happy to return the favor.

The merfolk did not talk or make any sounds at all. They communicated telepathically, which took a little getting used to. To speak with the Merpeople, you had to learn to first shield your private thoughts from everyone, then how to direct your speech to individuals or more. Many 'words' were actually pictures sent through the mind – names in particular. For example, a mermaid would not name her baby 'John', but think of the pretty quartz boulder that sits in the silt bed at the northern mouth of the lake – that image would be her son's name.

Hermione was taking an art lesson with a couple of mermaids one day. The water was cool, and a school of fresh water eels were gently wrapping themselves around her upper arms and waist while she attached bits of glass and shell to a wall mosaic with her teachers. Hermione had developed an affinity with the eels – it seems once she had been 'officially' declared Slytherin's heir, she had been gifted instantly with parseltongue. Eels were close enough to the land snakes that she was able to communicate telepathically with them in the snake language. And although Hermione did not care for snakes, for some reason she liked the eels.

The three were working on a mural of Hogwarts in the King's throne room. Mosaics for the merfolk were not the flat art form of the human, typically made with geometric squares of glass. The merfolk delighted in finding refuse from the land peoples, interesting stones, shells, bones, or anything that caught their eyes, and would create art that had more dimension than its land-based equivalent. The components of the pictures were attached with magic, and magically preserved. Stucco, cement or glue tends not to work well under water.

She was humming to herself while working. Hermione couldn't make sound anymore – the merfolk only communicated in the mind – but she was happily recalling a soft rock song and really getting into the piano part.

"What is that!" her teacher gasped in her head with amazement.

Hermione looked at her teacher surprised at the reaction. Without vocal cords or spoken language, music was evidently unknown in the water realms. Her art teacher, an elderly mermaid with a 'pictorial name' that showed the graceful water plants that grow at the western edge of the lake (Hermione called her Kelpie), was trembling. "It is merely a song, my teacher. Have I offended you?" she sent to Kelpie's mind.

"Please! Do it some more! What are the sounds that go with that voice?" Kelpie swam next to Hermione, and grasped her hand, gazing into the witch's brown eyes. The other mermaid, (pictorial name showing the smooth river rocks from the distant river – Hermione called her Stoney), came close too and asked to share.

With a smile, Hermione recalled the song again. Kelpie and Stoney 'called' for their friends, and more joined. She started to recall all kinds of songs for the Merfolk – classical, rock, folk, muggle and wizard alike. The only song she avoided at all costs was the Hogwarts anthem (everyone would sing it to whatever tune they chose – all at the same time). She concentrated on the many instruments she could recall, individual voices, varied styles. Hermione didn't know it then, but she was changing the creative essence of the Merpeople for all time.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

Hermione could sense that her time with the Merfolk was coming to an end. The months had flown by, and she had fallen in love with every one of the kind, gentle people of the water.

With hugs good-bye and sad, sweet words of parting, she slowly swam through the stone arch. The arch, she had learned, was actually a portal into the real past at the time of the founders – which explained the longing look Salazar had given the lake. She had been forbidden to even poke her head out of the water without swimming through the arch first, to enter the dimension of the founder's painting. The painting did not have the power to sustain a school of Merpeople, so the arch allowed her to travel through time and space and stay in the real lake with the real merfolk at the time of the founders.

Hermione knew that Dumbledore spoke the merfolk tongue, but she had no idea what kind of relationship he had with the present day Merpeople of Hogwarts. She could imagine it was a rather one-sided one, and that he had not been totally honest with them. She had worked hard on her language skills so she could forge a strong relationship with the Merpeople when she returned.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

Back at the castle Hermione pondered the grass snake curled up in the patch of sunlight on the classroom floor. "How long will she stay?" she asked her teacher.

Salazar walked over to the olive colored snake, gently picked it up and allowed it to wrap around his neck for the warmth. "The *serpentsoria* spell creates a snake of the caster's choosing – its duration depends upon the strength of the witch or wizard and their concentration during casting. Naturally it can be canceled with a 'nox' spell. Now – can you guess why you created a grass snake? Why not, say, a basilisk?"

Hermione shuddered. "I was thinking that grass snakes look sort of friendly, and was hoping for something like that when I cast the spell. So I can cast any snake I choose?"

He nodded and waved his hand over the snake, which disappeared. "Create an African bush viper for me."

With a gulp she concentrated, picturing firmly in her mind the bright green poisonous snake he requested. With a wave of her wand, she conjured the requested reptile soundlessly. It was beautiful, as snakes go, but Hermione definitely had a bit of a problem with the creatures. She remained on the other side of the room from it, and didn't engage it in conversation.

"Couldn't we just study more logic, or defense?" she asked her teacher hopefully.

"I think this could come in very handy in battle" Salazar smirked. "Buck up and get over your squeamishness – imagine what Riddle would do if faced with a basilisk under your command?"

She took a deep calming breath. "OK – let's perfect this."

**OoOoOoOoOo**

"We are going to start your animagus training today, Miss Granger" Salazar informed the bushy-haired witch as she entered the classroom in the dungeon. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, with an air of expectant amusement playing around his lips and eyes.

"Where do I start?" Hermione already had quill and parchment at the ready.

"Well, thanks to my wife's star pupil, we already know what your form will be. It seems that those with fairy ancestry can see that. Shall we play a guessing game like Helga forced poor Mr. Longbottom into?" Salazar had the most marvelous smirk when he chose to.

"Um, how about a hint or two" Hermione asked, feeling suddenly afraid of what form she might take. She didn't like the amusement radiating off of her teacher.

"Right – how about the two basic rules of animagus. First, they will be a creature from your native land, England for you, and second, no magical creatures. That only happens in novels. Bad ones at that." Salazar's eyes sparkled with challenge. He loved to see just how far

he could push his student. She never disappointed him in growing girlishly frustrated, and then coming through with flying colors.

"I hope it's nothing that flies" she practically whispered.

"You are safe there" her teacher answered, examining his cuticles and trying not to laugh.

"Is it something cute?" she looked at him hopefully.

"I think so" Salazar smiled most dangerously.

"Oh, I am so dead. I'm not going to like this, am I?" Hermione's face lost all color as he shook his head in agreement.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

Harry was a man very in tune with his wife-to-be. The link between their minds was very firm and communication with the woman he loved happened with only the lightest of thoughts. The past several months had been difficult with her away with the Merpeople of the lake – he had missed her deeply. So when an hour into the morning classes he felt her scream, he felt down to his very toes. Without a word to Godric, he leapt to his feet and ran out the door down to the dungeons where Salazar held his teachings.

*"Hermione! What is it? Are you ok? I'm coming!"* Harry sent out words of comfort and love and he raced down the stairs. He thought he heard Godric snicker behind him, but didn't give it any mind, consumed with worry for his lady.

*"Yes, no, oh ICK!"* Hermione was wailing, and Harry was comforted to sense she wasn't in danger at least.

He burst through the door to see Salazar rolling with glee on a tabletop, crying and pounding the wooden surface with hilarity. On the floor of the dank room was a three-foot long poisonous adder snake – the only native poisonous snake of Britain. He looked over at Salazar and turned to Godric, who was laughing too.

*"Hermione?"* He asked the snake in parseltounge.

The snake curled up and hid its face in its own coils, obviously embarrassed. *“Don’t look at me”* she wailed telepathically *“I’m horrid! I’m afraid of myself!”*

Harry gently scooped up his reptilian fiancé and examined her closely. She had sleek gray/brown scales with a deep brown pattern on her back, and glittering yellow eyes. *Hermione, you are beautiful!”* he crooned. *“Your animagus is so cool!”* He hissed soothingly to her in parseltongue, stroking her cool, sleek body and admiring her from every angle.

*“Please put me down, Harry. I can’t have a proper cry as a-a-a SNAKE!”*

He complied and set her gently down, and Hermione instantly transformed back to human, and threw herself into his arms, bawling loudly. Trying not to laugh, which was very difficult when the two founders in the room were howling and thumping each other on their backs, he held her comfortingly.

“You have my permission to bite them if you like.” He whispered in her ear. “We’ve covered snake anti-venoms in potions class already.”

## Chapter 25

### Harry

Godric Gryffindor was not a man who didn't think before acting. He was not a man of misplaced passions. But that's not to say he didn't jump into something with both feet and say afterwards 'boy that was fun' while everyone else was weakly shaking their heads and downing healing potions.

He had waited too long to get his hands on Harry. This was going to be a blast. He all but dragged him to his classroom and practically threw him a long sword. "Time to train, lad!" he quipped and threw himself at him with abandon.

Harry finished the week barely able to walk or lift his arms. He hurt. But boy; was he learning to duel. Magical dueling, swords, soundless, wandless, two wands – Harry was growing very dangerous and proficient in it all. Godric was like a child in Honeydukes when Harry showed him his dueling/second wand. They quickly learned the best ways to utilize it, and had many fun group sessions with them.

The Chosen One was already as comfortable with wandless magic as he was 'with-wand', thanks to the Goblin training, but Goblins did not use magic in fighting as much as weaponry – it was a matter of personal pride for them. Godric was able to now hone his ability and teach Harry to cast curses and hexes without the use of his wands. Harry still felt that his custom wand 'packed more punch', but if he found himself wandless, he was still a force to be reckoned with.

Harry was destined to be a warrior – forged by time herself to be the weapon to take down the perversion that was Tom Riddle. And Harry wasn't going to let time down. He was strong with a wiry strength – Neville was the muscle and Harry was the tendons. He was graceful as a dancer, cunning as a fox, and he was quickly becoming mortally dangerous to the dark.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry was sitting in the great hall with his friends. They were all sharpening their swords, Neville's companion gnome giving them

helpful advice. Gnomes had an affinity with metals and stone as well as plants. A house-elf came up with a tray of hot mead for the young adults to enjoy. He thanked the elf as he took his tankard, looking the creature over. The house-elves were different then present day. It drove Harry to distraction at times to have to 'own' Dobby, Winky, and the rest – it grated on his sense of justice, and he absolutely hated the way the wizarding world looked down on the house-elf.

Harry called the elf back to him. "Andy?" The elf looked up and came over. "Why are you so different from the elves of my time?"

Andy smiled but wasn't much help. "I'm sorry; sir, but I've never met the elves of your time."

Rowena looked at the exchange sadly. "I can answer that for him, Harry. Your house elves are tragically the product of countless generations of inbreeding forced on them by possessive wizards. As with any living being, inbreeding will reinforce both the good and bad genetics of that being. House-elves from your time are stronger in magic and loyalty, but on the down side, they are not as intelligent or independent. Wizards over the centuries have convinced themselves that house-elves have always been thus, and taken advantage of it."

Harry felt himself choked up. Poor Dobby and Winky was a product of wizard's selfish needs. Perhaps laws could be passed to allow for more independence for the house-elves. With a larger gene pool, perhaps the house-elves could regain their dignity given time.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry dutifully followed Godric into the Forbidden Forest. He felt the reassuring thump of his sword in its scabbard bumping his leg rhythmically as he walked, and knew he had two wands instantly accessible if necessary. Since his teacher didn't look concerned, he wouldn't be either.

They traveled a tangled path until they came to a clearing. With a start, Harry recognized the boulders lining the area – this was the place where he first saw Voldemort, drinking the blood of the innocent unicorn. His eyes landed on the spot where the dead animal had lain, with the ghostly Quirrell/Voldemort hunched over it. Godric stopped in

the center and called out a shout in some unknown language that filled Harry's very veins with pride and hope. He looked around expectantly.

He didn't have long to wait, before several centaurs came trotting into the clearing. They gave formal nods to Godric, whom they clearly saw as an equal. He nodded back in such a manner that Harry knew Godric saw them as his peers as well. Harry bowed and they eyed him over before speaking.

"Welcome, Chosen One. The stars have spoken of you for centuries. It is an honor to see you at last" a tall, sturdy bay spoke. The centaur was serious, noble, and had the same dreaminess as Luna. Harry felt the wisdom of ages radiating from the man.

A centaur with a palomino body spoke to Godric. "What can we do for you, Godric?"

Godric smiled sadly. "The centaurs of Harry's time have grown distrustful from generations of dishonest wizards dealing with them shamefully. The fault is man's. Can you teach Harry to speak so he can mend the bridges wizard-kind has burned?"

The third centaur Harry noticed with a start was a female, black bodied with white stockings. "We can teach him our tongue and manners, but what he does with it is up to him."

Godric bowed again. "I will leave him with you. Let him come and visit the castle as he needs – he has companions he is closely bonded with." With a friendly clap on Harry's back, he turned and left Harry with the fierce looking centaurs.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

With a small sigh Harry turned from his retreating teacher and eyed the three centaurs. They studied him for a time, and the female smiled. "My name is Allyce, young heir. Come with us."

They left the familiar clearing and made their way deeper in the Forbidden Forest. "Just how far does this painting go?" Harry glanced around with astonishment. There were many creatures running and

flying through the woods as they passed – how could one painting support all of this?

The tall bay, whom Harry learned was named Brennan, smiled. “Once you entered the forest, you left the painting, Chosen One. You are correct – a painting can only host so much magic. Most of your current experience takes place in other dimensions.

“Hmmm” Harry replied, not at all surprised. “When are we, then?”

The palomino, Chatten, mused “I’m not sure how to translate. We don’t use the same calendar as you. We go by the stars.”

*“Oh this is going to take a looong time”* Harry thought to himself.

The four walked in silence through the darkening wood. They stopped at a clearing in a sunken glen where Allyce walked to a small group of saplings and started chanting in a low voice. Harry watched with interest as the small trees willingly bent and wove themselves into an open-ended shelter.

Night fell as the centaurs taught Harry which plants were edible and how to cook them over a small campfire that gave off little light or smoke. Once the meal was done, they put the fire out to watch the stars that showed through the clearing in the trees above their heads. “Most of our lessons” Chatten smiled solemnly at Harry, “will be at night.”

Harry wasn’t sure which he would be missing more – meat or conversation that didn’t wander down mental bunny trails.

**O0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry spent the next few months with Chatten, Allyce and Brennan studying hard. He took occasional breaks back to Hogwarts, mostly for a good steamy snog with Hermione and to pig out on roast mutton or beef. He had a long list of what he missed from his own time – Hermione, plumbing, the huge variety of food at Hogwarts-present-day, Hermione, draft-free rooms, beds (when he was with the centaurs), Hermione, meat (when he was with the centaurs), underwear, and Hermione.

He was truly not one to whine, but the centaur magic was very strange and foreign to him. Centaurs did not use wands, and didn't do much in the way of magic as Harry would call it. They would enchant their weapons for strength and accuracy, work with the trees for shelter as he had seen, and they would do charms for secrecy and protection. The horse-people didn't have many possessions, so there wasn't much to defend, levitate, or hide.

On overcast days Harry would learn the centaur tongue and customs. His three companions were very easy to get along with as centaurs go, but they were not warm and friendly. Centaurs just were not that way. They were consumed with reading the stars and forecasting the future over decades of comparative star alignments. Why was anyone's guess. How did it benefit the centaurs to watch Mars or Jupiter for years and years and be able to say with a deep, wisdom-filled voice "A time of great change is at hand." Just what is that suppose to mean and who does it benefit?

Harry left the centaurs with a deep appreciation of their love for the wood and creatures, and a huge respect for their patience. But he couldn't honestly say he would miss them.

**00o0o0o0o0o**

Harry was sitting in a sun-drenched classroom with Rowena and Godric, having returned from the centaurs. "Today" she started, "We are going to talk about your curse scar. Have you ever thought about why you survived Riddle's attack as a baby?"

The young wizard raised his eyebrow in surprise. There would be no dueling today, he realized sadly. "Well, Dumbledore told me it was because my mum sacrificed her life to protect me."

"So was it your Mum or your Dad's death that protected you?" she challenged the boy.

"Err, well, he said she invoked an ancient charm – she was said to be good at charms." Harry wriggled in his seat, uncomfortable with the subject.

“Harry, when did she have time to cast a charm? You have lived through your parent’s death far too many times due to your link with Riddle and your sensitivity to dementors. What did she cast?” Godric looked at him with a penetrating gaze.

He shut his mouth, realizing it had been hanging open. “She didn’t” he concluded. “And it could not have been merely the act of sacrifice – I would guess many parents die to protect their children. Am I right?”

Godric smiled encouragingly. “Yes Harry. So how did you survive?”

“I take it you know, or have some good idea?” Harry leaned forward with interest. Knowing if he could survive a killing curse a second time could come in handy – especially when one has a blood thirsty crazed megalomaniac after them.

Rowena cleared her throat. “We don’t know for sure, Harry. But we can draw some conclusions. First of all, everyone knows there is no spell to shield the *Avada Kedavra* – if your mother had discovered one, she would have used it to protect your father and herself as well as you.”

Harry nodded in agreement with her logic.

The black-haired witch continued. “I think we all agree it wasn’t simply the act of self sacrifice. If that were the case, your father’s death would have shielded your mother. Also, there would be more examples of it.”

“Some people feel it’s unblockable” Godric broke in, “but you know that’s not true. You have seen several instances where it was blocked by physical objects. So there is the possibility of armor – but I doubt your Mum had dressed you in plate or dragonhide for the evening.”

“So how?” Harry asked with frustration. “How *did* I survive one?”

Godric gave him a slightly apologetic look. “Well, to start with, the *Avada Kedavra* was invented by the four of us,”

“WHAT?” Harry interrupted. “I would NEVER have expected that!”

Rowena sniffed “don’t jump to conclusions, dear. We actually developed it as a humane way to butcher animals. We did not teach it to anyone, and we never used it on sentient beings. It seems my dear husband Salazar kept a private journal that included the development of it, which surfaced in the 1800s. Sadly, a dark wizard got hold of the notes and re-invented it.”

Harry gaped at the witch, feeling marginally better at hearing that.

“Anyway” Godric continued, “being a spell that was ‘co-authored’, so to say, by the four of us, it can not be used by one of us against any of us. I can’t kill Rowena with the AK, and she can’t kill Helga with it, etc.”

“Why and how?” Harry asked, rubbing his scar unconsciously.

“Too bad Hogwarts doesn’t teach magical theory or creation anymore, but creation of a spell is a very difficult and involved process. Basically when a mage creates a spell, it has their magical ‘signature’ in it. The notes that Salazar left were detailed enough to bring to light *our* old spell – signature and all. And having our signatures on that spell means that blood heirs can not kill each other with it.”

Harry’s jaw dropped open again. He conjured a glass of water to re-hydrate his tongue that was getting way too much air. “Sooooo you are saying that I...” he started hesitantly.

“Yes” Godric spoke up. “You must be related to one of us. We haven’t bothered following genealogy over the past 1000 years, as we don’t leave the painting – we concentrate on ‘spiritual heirs’ when the need arises. We don’t know for sure which one of us is your great-great-great, and so on, grandfather or mother.”

The water gone, Harry wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and sputtered “now hold on. Wouldn’t that mean the wizard who created *Scourgify* centuries ago would find his friends could not use it on him to clean his robes after a sloppy meal? What about other every day spells like *Expelliarmus* and *Wingardium Leviosa*?”

Rowena smiled at his astuteness. “Very good, Harry. But commonly used spells were created removing that magical signature so that

wouldn't happen. That's just common courtesy when inventing a spell that has the potential of becoming popular. We didn't bother with that step with *Avada Kedavra* because we never intended to use it anywhere but the farm attached to Hogwarts for butchering meat for the school."

"So whose kid am I?" Harry looked at the two of them, now squirming with excitement.

Godric smiled broadly. "Probably mine, Harry. Your parents did live in *Godric's Hollow*, and you were able to pull my sword from my sorting hat."

"How cool is that?" Harry was grinning ear to ear. "But it's good and bad news. Tom can't use it on me, but I can't use it on him."

Rowena and Godric both nodded solemnly in agreement.

"So why did his body die when he attacked me as a baby?" Harry frowned. Even if your soul was left behind, he still felt the body dying was pretty bad.

"Again, we are just theorizing, but we think it is the amount of magic you have. You are a very powerful wizard, Harry. When he tried to kill you, not only was the spell unable to kill you due to your blood ties, your magic threw it back magnified. There are instances of that happening in young children – just never with the AK." Rowena studied Harry like a specimen in a display case. "But again, we have no way of proving it."

Harry's head shot up suddenly. "Then how did my dad die?" he asked penetratingly. I'm pretty sure he would be the blood relation to you, Godric."

"Who says James was killed with the AK?" Godric asked softly. "You weren't in the room when Riddle murdered him – you were upstairs with your mother. From what you told us, there were the signs of a battle in the parlor – several spells were traded, and there wasn't room to hide behind anything. It appears Riddle used something else. When the *Avada Kedavra* is used against a sentient being, the caster has to use an intense amount of hatred and power. It is likely that

Riddle did not see your father as a challenge and was 'playing' with him, not willing to expend his magical energy on removing him."

Harry winced at the thought of this. He would have to speak with his father's portrait when he returned to the trunk.

**O0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry had a tough day. He had finished his training with the centaurs last week, and was slowly getting use to living with humans again. Today had started out rough. First, he had started studying the steps to revealing his animagus form, and it was interrupted by a rather hysterical Hermione. It had taken him the rest of the morning to calm her down and accept her, in his opinion, very cool adder form.

He learned at lunch that earlier in the week Luna had already achieved her form of some kind of hawk, and Neville was a black wolf. Granted he was starting later than his friends, but if he was totally honest with himself, he wasn't use to being last in things.

He was really struggling with the enchantments to discover his form. At first he was hoping for something way cool like a dragon, Pegasus, or griffon, but Godric had assured him that magical beasts were not possible. He really wanted it to be something that could fly, and the only progress he had made was the briefest of glimpse of a clawed avian foot, so that was good.

What kind of bird? He looked through the windows in the Great Hall, waiting for his friends to join him for dinner. An owl would be neat – he could talk to Hedwig much better that way. A hawk like Luna's wasn't bad, although he felt her form was way too girly for him self. Perhaps an eagle or menacing looking vulture? Or maybe the foot wasn't from a bird, but a bat? A bat could be very cool – the ability to get around in the dark could be very useful, and it would be a plus to make girls scream.

**O0o0o0o0o0o**

After a week of struggling with discovering his form, everyone met in the Great Hall to help Harry. Rowena looked pointedly at Luna "are you sure you can't help him out?" If she sounded a bit annoyed, it

was because she was. She had been trying to get Luna all week to tell her what form Harry's animagus would be, and Luna flatly refused.

"All right, Harry," Rowena marched up to him. "This could have gone much quicker for you if a *certain* witch" she shot a dirty look at Luna again, who was ignoring it as only Luna can, "would help more. I've got a spell that the four of us will do on you to achieve your first transfiguration. Once you've seen it and felt it, you will be able to do it from there."

He nodded in agreement and stood in a large open area of the hall.

"Why so much space around you, Harry?" Luna asked mildly.

"Well, I know I'm some sort of bird, but I don't know what. What if I'm a condor, or even a Pterodactyl? I don't want to hurt anyone." He stood in still expectancy, waiting for the spell.

The founders stood in a circle around Harry and started chanting and waving their wands at him. With a puff of smoke, Harry was gone. Neville started searching around the ceiling for a flying hawk or eagle, but Hermione and the founders were staring at the floor in mute shock. Luna simply raised an eyebrow and said "I didn't want to be the one to burst his bubble".

Harry looked up at his friends. "*Burst my bubbles? What does Luna mean?*" Harry tried to look over his shoulder to see his back, but his head didn't bend that way. "*Well, I'm not an owl then*" he thought practically. He tried to bend down to see his chest, but found his neck was relatively short and stiff. He cocked his head and looked at Hermione and the founders. Hermione was clasping her hands by her cheek and cooing – not a good sign. The founders were in a worse state than Harry had found Salazar the other morning. They were snorting, crying, and choking with mirth. Why were they so huge? Just how big was he?

With a dirty look at the teachers, he spread his wings and took off. He landed lightly on a window sill and examined the reflection and peeped in extreme annoyance and humiliation. The bird peeping back at him was a robin.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

Harry was on his second flagon of mead. Due to the time difference he was now of age and, quite frankly, he needed it. He, Lord Harry Furybolt James Potter-Black, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One, Goblin warrior, hope of the wizarding world and heir to Godric Gryffindor had an animagus form of a common robin. And not even a large American Robin, but a 'cute widdle roly polly' British robin. The stuff of Christmas cards. *Not* the stuff of legends. He would never, never live this down.

Hermione tried to be sympathetic, but kept breaking into choruses of how cute he was. He didn't want to be *cute* – he wanted to be imposing, dangerous, and COOL! She tried to point out that robins are very, very brave, especially for their size, but quite frankly it didn't help.

*"Oh well"* he sighed, draining the earthenware tankard, *"at least I can fly."*

## Chapter 26a

### Back to the Present

Classes were now held in group sessions, with the ghosts in their solid forms helping with the practicals. The four youths learned how to combine their magic to cast tooth-jarring powerful spells, and practical uses for their animagus forms. Harry still had to end days involving his robin form with a tankard of 'liquid medicine' to sooth his ego. At least Malfoy would never see it.

Dueling lessons were getting more and more intense. It was now Founderettes against Founders, and everything short of unforgivables was game. At first it was terrifying to cast slashing and dismembering hexes so close to his friends and fiancé, and very disturbing to be casting them *at* his beloved teachers. But they quickly learned that Luna could heal just about anything on the spot, and the more brutal the battle, the better the lessons learned.

Brutal was the word for it. The founders had no qualms with hurting the students, and hurting them badly. There was only one time the students relaxed a bit after a duel started getting rough, 'knowing' their teachers wouldn't really hurt them. They spent a full painful week recovering in the infirmary with absolutely no sympathy from their mentors. They never made that mistake again.

So their final group duel started. The fearsome foursome found themselves immediately attacked with a frightening barrage of hexes and curses, which Luna created a strong shield to deflect. Harry leapt forward and struck at Godric with his sword, Neville close to his side. While Hermione started firing off hexes two-wanded at Helga and Rowena, Neville transfigured the torches from the wall sconces to attack Salazar and Harry and he lit upon Godric with swords. Godric was grinning like a maniac.

The founders had succeeded in turning the four wizards into a finely tuned machine. Harry and his friends used their strengths and covered each other's weaknesses. Harry had no doubts that the founders were not giving it their all – they were their teachers and not truly trying to kill them. Battling together, Harry would courageously confront the largest threat to the group, as he had the most skills in

dueling and defense, and had the most, well, courage. Luna was the shield of the group – casting powerful blocks and shields, keeping an eye on everyone's health and stamina, and healing as needed. Hermione was the cleverness – casting the unexpected or unforeseen spell. Neville was the staunch and strong ally – a powerhouse of strength fighting his way to victory and never leaving his friend's sides.

This particular duel was dragging on – everyone on both sides was exhausted. Luna sent the group a burst of energy to her friends through her fairy magic, and Hermione conjured a basilisk to attack the founders. As their mentors were avoiding the basilisk gaze, Harry went again for Godric with two wands, and Hermione swiftly changed into her snake form and sank her venomous fangs into Salazar's heel. That would teach him to laugh at her.

Gladly and proudly the founders yielded. They had taught their students well.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

They had spent about a year total with the founders, and as the lessons were winding down, they were all feeling homesick to some degree. Although only three weeks had passed in the present world, they had indeed aged and filled out. No longer were they four gangly teens, but four young adults with power and strength oozing out of their very beings. Neville had grown his beard, like Luna suggested, and it suited him. He was now even taller than Ron, and powerfully built, with softly curling black hair tied back in a ponytail. Luna had transformed her custom wand into a staff, and used it in that form most of the time. Both of the women were shapelier and mature looking, with the charisma that comes from self-confidence. Harry didn't feel like he had changed any, but in reality he was wiry muscled, graceful and balanced and had grown a mustache.

It was always summer in the painting, and there was a feeling of sadness in the air. Luna looked at her professors and companions around the table and said "this is the last meal together, isn't it?"

The others looked around in shock, as the founders all nodded their heads in sad agreement. "Yes, dear children" Helga finally spoke

sadly, “we have taught you all we can. The four of you now have the skills to take Riddle down.”

“The final battle” Godric spoke solemnly, “will be more than you against Riddle. He will use any body and anything for allies to defeat you, Dumbledore, and the ministry. He is low on Death Eaters, so have no doubt that he will look elsewhere for assistance.”

Rowena frowned in her deep-thinking way. “He will use magical creatures and beings, but if he wins, he will slowly kill off anything that isn’t a pureblood wizard. The magical world is doomed if you do not defeat him and his disillusioned followers. If the magical world collapses, I don’t know if the non-magical world can survive.”

“Remember to use all the skills and abilities you have learned over the years” Salazar said. “Use everything we represent – strength, cunning, wisdom and righteousness. Use everything that love and friendships can offer in assistance. It is Riddle’s paranoia and megalomania that will be his undoing. It is Dumbledore’s paranoia and megalomania, though in a lesser degree than Riddle’s, which has lost him the headmaster position.”

Lady Hogwarts spoke last. “You are the true headmasters now. I have withdrawn all but minimal communication with Dumbledore – he has only what is needed to protect the students and run the school until you can take over. Finish your education, and please turn the school back to what it is now in our times. End the inter-house rivalry, and especially restore Slytherin into the house it was meant to be.”

With an unspoken signal, the founders and ghosts stood up and Harry and his friends followed. With a quick trip to the dorms to collect their belongings and change back their clothing, they walked out to the courtyard, where the founders sang and played encouraging songs for them. Rowena looked up toward the hut on the cliff and said “it is time – your headmaster is out of Hogwarts and the moment to part has come.”

Reluctantly they trudged up the cliff in pairs – each founder with their heir, giving final words of love and encouragement. When too quickly they reached the back door of the stone cottage, Harry had a strange feeling that time had not moved, and they had only just stepped into

the picture high on the castle wall. The founders would go no further than the inside of the hut. With tearful hugs and kisses, the four founderettes left the cottage and entered the forest clearing, seeing the window back into their time in the far distance. Tears in their eyes, they heard the cottage door gently shut, and knew that chapter of their lives was over with.

With a final short hike, they were once again at the flexible window looking into Hogwarts main stairway, and the stairs had indeed swung to meet them. Waiting for them with large smiles were the house ghosts, cheering for them as they stepped through. Harry blinked and looked around – after three years of a chilly, bare walled Hogwarts, it was jarring to the senses to be back where they belonged, with walls covered in paintings and tapestries, suits of armor, and glass on the windows. It would take some getting use to.

“Well” Sir Nicholas said warmly, “I will miss having my solid body constantly! We can go back and forth, but we are bound to the present day Hogwarts so typically we can’t visit for any length of time. And it is nice to have a job to do.”

“Oh Baron” Hermione sniffed sorrowfully, “I will miss it dearly. And we have so much work ahead of us.”

The procession worked its way down the stairs to the sixth floor. They knew they could have popped at any time, but felt they needed to see the school, even if it was only for a few minutes. The four of them could hear and feel Lady Hogwarts clearly in their minds and hearts now, encouraging them and giving them constant updates on the state of the house-elves, location of Peeves, Mrs. Norris and Filch, and the giant squid. It would take a while to place the constant input of information into a more recessed part of their brains.

“Anne?” Neville turned to the now translucent ghost of Hufflepuff, unconsciously recalling the vibrant young lady they studied with the past three years. “What’s up with Filch? Why is he so hateful, and why does Dumbledore keep him around?”

Anne and the other ghosts’ expressions were a mixed bag of sadness, anger, amusement and revulsion. “Why don’t you pop back to your trunk and we will discuss it there” she suggested.

The four friends popped into Godric's Suitcase and took turns hugging a delighted Dobby and Winky and greeted the many fairies. Harry practically ran over to his parents and Sirius' portraits and exchanged heart felt salutations. *"Boy, this time warping can really mess with your head"* He thought wryly.

"You children don't look like children anymore" Lily smiled sadly. "I understand time was different for you, but it's a bit of a shock. I'm not sure about the mustache, Harry." James and Sirius smirked in agreement. "Tell us what you learned while you were gone!"

"It was wonderful!" Hermione had an arm around both the elves, which were eating up the attention. "We learned all kinds of wandless and soundless spell casting, how far Hogwarts has gone from its original vision, we are all animagus now, we studied with the personification of Hogwarts ..."

James interrupted her before she passed out from lack of breath. "Animagus! I knew you all had it in you! What forms are you?" He looked around eagerly, especially at Harry, who was pointedly avoiding their eyes.

With a smile, Luna and Neville transformed into their animal forms. The three painted friends nodded with approval. "What about you two?" Sirius looked at Hermione and Harry.

Hermione gulped, and turned into the shiny brown-patterned adder, which was greeted with a chorus of 'ooohs' and 'aahhhs'. She transformed back looking relieved. Everyone was looking at Harry now.

"I'm going to pop out and visit Griphook, the twins and the Lupins in a bit, but I want to hear what Anne has to say about Filch." Harry said, ignoring the pointed looks.

"Harry, what is your animagus form?" James asked with interest. "Are you a stag like me?"

"Harry, is something wrong?" Lily asked with concern, seeing her son's face turning red with embarrassment.

“Yah, Cub, let’s see what ‘cha got!” Sirius broke in with a grin. Lily noticed her son’s friends suddenly looking away, pretending they weren’t listening. Strange.

Harry gave the sigh of a condemned man. “OK” he muttered with resignation, and transformed. At the sight of the small robin now perched on the back of the chair closest to the fireplace the three in the portrait did what any other loving parent/guardian would have done. They choked and sputtered with a losing battle not to laugh. They really did try.

Giving up, James and Lily were holding each other howling, and Sirius collapsed on the floor of his portrait. Harry transformed back and glared. “Hey – how about some support here!” he yelled at them. “And no – I’m not going to register. I’d never hear the end of it.” With that he spun on his heels and sat on the couch, glaring at nothing in particular, his back to the fireplace.

“Oh Harry – it’s not bad at all. It will be dead useful for spying and such” James said once he calmed down. “It was just rather unexpected.”

Harry muttered something like “hrump” and looked toward the ghost of Anne. “Alright – new subject. Tell us about Filch.” Everyone in the room sat down to listen.

Anne nodded and started in. “Headmaster Dumbledore took Filch on after defeating Grindelwald. Filch’s father, Albert Filch, saved Dumbledore’s life in the next to final battle and owed him a life debt. This was his way of repaying it. Argus wasn’t very happy with the arrangement – he was deeply embarrassed and humiliated about being a squib, as was his parents, but he didn’t have the education, smarts or drive to make it in the muggle world.

The Baron nodded in agreement. “Yes, he started out with a small attitude problem, and it rapidly went downhill from there. He truly resents anyone with magical ability – especially muggle-born. He feels they don’t “deserve” the gift of magic.

“Headmaster Dumbledore gave him Mrs. Norris as a kitten” the Friar continued, “to help him in controlling students. We aren’t sure what

she is – an enchanted cat, part kneezle, or perhaps a cursed human? I lean toward that myself – they certainly are connected somehow, and the cat is indeed intelligent and malevolent.”

“But how old is Filch?” Hermione asked in amazement.

Sir Nicolas shrugged, tipping his barely-attached head off onto a shoulder. Pushing it back up with one hand, he said “Well, somewhere in his 70s, I’d imagine. Perhaps far older – he was an adult when he came here in 1946. He was always scruffy and uncaring toward his appearance, so it was hard to tell exactly how old he is.”

“I thought Squibs had the same life span as muggles” Luna pondered. “That doesn’t follow through for him then. He’s very energetic for a man in his 70s or older.”

“That’s part of the mystery” Anne agreed. “We think that the Headmaster might be using the Philosopher’s stone on him as part of the debt, and gave him Mrs. Norris as a way of compensating him for his lack of magic. I think the Headmaster keeps him around because his attitude amuses him – like Professor Snape’s does.”

The Baron nodded in agreement. “We think that the ‘dear’ Headmaster has been keeping him in Hogwarts all these years to keep him embittered and indebted to himself. Like he has Hagrid, Lupin and yourself, Lord Potter-Black.”

“Wow” Neville shook his head in wonder. “That will be a pretty problem to figure out when we take over. I don’t want someone that mean with authority over students. But I feel sorry for him too.” Harry and Hermione nodded in agreement, and shelved the topic for another day.

But with an amused look, Luna popped out of the trunk. She appeared in one of the corridors, arms full of books, when she ‘accidentally’ bumped into Mr. Filch. Dropping books and a wand right at his feet, Filch growled at the girl “Watch where you’re going! What are you doing here this time of year?”

Luna looked at him dazedly. "I have an appointment. Oh – could you please hand me that wand?"

Filch shot her a disbelieving look, and bent down to pick up the wooden stick. Suddenly red sparks started sputtering out the top of it. With a startled cry, he practically threw it at her. "What did that do?" he cried with fright and anger.

"Why Mr. Filch" Luna answered in her mild, calm voice, "Surely you recognize a magic indicator? It's one of those wands used to check and see if a person is a wizard, like your self."

Mr. Filch started to sputter and gasp like a fish out of water. He suddenly turned and sped off down the hall. Professor Flitwick was always kind to him – he could answer some questions...

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### **Author Notes:**

*Oh my – I'm going to need a 'grin-ectomy' after all the reviews on the last chapter! I wake up at 6:30 in the morning after posting chapter 25 to find my e-mail overflowing with reactions to Harry's animagus form and the AK 'problem' – I can't stop laughing and smiling. My keyboard has melted from some of the flames, but hey – it keeps down heating costs! And flamers – keep on letting me know how much you hate me, but could you tone down some of the 4-letter words? My son reads my reviews too – well he use to. I won't let him now!*

### **About Harry's Robin form:**

*OK – why a robin? First of all, American robins and British robins are two entirely different species. The ONLY thing they have in common is an orangey-red chest. American robins were named by homesick Brits – they are not the same bird. British robins are tiny and amazingly bold and brave. They will fight actually to the DEATH to defend their mate or their territory. They will hand tame very quickly to take treats from humans. Harry is small for his age, and will*

*courageously put himself in danger to defend his friends, and swiftly befriend those who are different than himself.*

*Many reviewers complained 'how is a robin going to help Harry fight Voldemort'. Well, an animagus form (in my story) is a reflection of the animal within – the magical powers-that-be don't choose and say "hey – Harry's a nice guy – let's give him the form of an elephant to help him trample his enemies". Some folks say 'a robin can't fight'. Again, an animagus form is nothing to do with becoming a weapon. How well can Rita Skeeter fight as a beetle? Sirius' dog form really doesn't fight – pretty useless against an animagus bear or panther. Hawks are great hunters, but fighters?*

*Another point – I got a lot of 'a robin is useless' e-mails. Well, how useful is a fox, or a dog, or a cat, or a rino? It's what you make out of it, not what it is. If I had an animagus form, it would probably be an Oscar fish. I have Oscars – very tough, predatory, loyal to their mate, intelligent, and a great sense of humor. (If you have never seen Oscars, they are amazing fish – the dog of the aquarium). The first time I transformed I'd be flopping on the floor gasping for air – pretty useless. Useless unless I transformed in water, used it for spying or sneaking into underwater places....*

*Harry's robin form really doesn't play into the story a whole lot from now on, but it will some. I was merely trying to bring in the scenario that we don't always get what we want or fantasize about in life. We get what life deals us and move on. Harry wanted something dangerous and cool - now he has to figure out how he can use the robin form since he didn't get a wolf, eagle, dragon, etc. And I wanted to point out that even pure and good Harry has an ego, and egos can take a hit here and there.*

*It is funny the passion that some reviews have voiced. It was like I hit readers personally or something. Hey – it's just a story, and it's my story. Just because I write something you personally disagree with doesn't mean I 'can't write'.*

*So sorry to all my fanfic friends who don't like Harry's animagus. It's not an April Fool joke, and it's not a dream sequence. Harry is a robin. If I have deeply offended folks so they want to stop reading – well go!*

*Find yourself a nice Super!Harry fanfic to read for crying out loud.  
Some of y'all take fan fiction waaaaay too seriously.*

## Chapter 26b

### Birthday Wishes

The Founderettes spent the next couple of days catching up to the present. Neville took Luna to his home to spend some time with Gran, and to 'meet' his parents at St. Mungo's. Although the stiff matron of the Longbottom clan was a bit bewildered that her grandson formally brought home a fairy/witch for marriage, she was soon won over by the girl's wisdom, calmness, and ever-present flock of fairies dancing around her and her grandson. She gave Neville her blessings and his mother's engagement ring to give to Luna, which he did without hesitation.

It took Mrs. Longbottom a bit longer to get use to Neville's new appearance – he had been growing and bulking during the school year, and she hadn't seen her grandson that often. Now, with him gone a year in alternate time, her pudgy and shy little grandson had returned a man. Proudly she kept glancing at him, refusing to cry. If only his parents could see him.

Harry and Hermione, using Goblin disguise, made the rounds, checking with Griphook, the twins, Tonks and Remus, and the Dursleys. They learned that evidently Voldemort had attempted to recruit demons to fight for him. There had been no attacks as of yet, but an all-out battle could be nasty. Demons, dark beings from other dimensions, would have hexes unknown to the wizard world, and resistances to many of their spells.

The Dursleys were doing much better with only a few weeks of therapy, and Harry was surprised to find Uncle Vernon even attempted to be polite. Harry had hopes for them to become a functioning family eventually, although he had no personal goals of being a close part of it.

Another task Harry accomplished that week was to confirm with his father's portrait that he had indeed been killed by another curse other than the *Avada Kedavra*. The Ministry and Aurors were in turmoil in 1980 due to the death of Voldemort and 'end' of the war, so the official inquest into the deaths of Lily and James was rather rushed and unprofessionally done.

They ended the week back arriving at Godric's Hollow and visiting the elves Tippy, Cookie, Icy, Kiki, and Lolly. Everyone had fully recovered from the abuse and neglect of the Malfoys, and was looking healthy but bored. Tippy was much better, being relieved from manual labor, and had been working hard on Potter history for Harry.

Everyone was sitting in the parlor of Godric's Hollow, chatting in a relaxed and friendly way. Harry glanced around the room and asked Hermione "do you want to settle here when we get married?"

She looked her fiancée in the eyes, and they both shared their innermost thoughts in an instant, and fell away with a startled jerk. "I, um, I thought, but..." was stuttered by both of them in bewildered confusion.

Hermione took a deep breath and started. "OK – we agree. That makes it easier. This feels like your parents house – neither one of us will feel completely comfortable making it into our own home. That's not good for a marriage."

"I think maybe we could just preserve it as-is." He looked out the window, deep in thought. After a moment he turned to Hermione and said "well, I do own another property. We should check it out."

Tippy smiled at the two. "Kind Masters" he spoke up, "your parents lived here at Godric's Hollow off and on. This was their favorite home, but they stayed on the move constantly during the war. They had re-settled here just a mere month before their death. Much of their time was also spent at Potter Manor."

"Can you take us there, Tippy?" Harry asked with excitement, and the elf nodded in agreement. With a call to Winky and Dobby to join them, the full troop of happy elves, Harry and Hermione popped off the Potter Manor.

Potter Manor was simply gorgeous. They arrived on a manicured lawn of immense scope. The gardens spread off into the distance, dotted by 'islands' of ancient trees and occasional ponds or streams. The house itself was timber framed yet huge, with room for dozens of children or guests. The only noticeable negative to the whole initial look was the absence of people or live stock.

When Harry finally found himself able to speak again, he weakly asked Tippy “just how far does my property go?”

Tippy smiled proudly and said “hundreds of unplottable acres, Masters. It has been home to the Potters since the 1300’s.”

“How many elves keep up this place, Tippy?” Hermione still had her jaw slack and open in amazement as they slowly walked toward the front door.

“The Potter elves all died off except myself” Tippy replied sadly. “The grounds and home have been maintained thanks to the elf network.”

“Oh man – do I owe a lot of elves my thanks! How can I ever repay them?” Harry felt floored. He could only imagine what it took to maintain so much property.”

“Kind Master” Tippy bowed to Harry, “it is an honor to serve The-Boy-Who-Lived, The Chosen One. You make our lives better. Elves who are bored line up to help on the Potter property – it is not a burden or a debt that needs repaying.”

They had at last reached the front door, which was made of thick oak, weathered to perfection and bound with hand-hewn iron straps. The house was perfect in Harry’s opinion – grand with room to breathe, but not stuffy or fussy in style, and he was grateful to feel Hermione’s thoughts echoed his own.

When Harry had first entered Godric’s Hollow last year, he had the unsettling feeling that someone would walk in the door any moment. The house was exactly as it had been left 15 years earlier – 15 year old magazines on the coffee table, his parents’ clothes in the closets and dressers, personal belongings that told the tale of a family scattered about. He never felt he could move or change anything without bringing shame to his parent’s memory. Potter Manor was different. The furniture was polished and ready for use, the rooms clean and aired, but there were no traces anywhere they looked that showed somebody lived in this house. It was waiting to be claimed, and Harry felt in his very pores it *wanted* to be claimed.

“Oh kind Master!” Winky breathed with delight, “this is a home fit for you and your wife!” She was peering around door ways, quivering with excitement. Dobby grinned with agreement.

Hermione looked at Winky and laughed. “Go ahead and find the kitchen, Winky! I know that’s what you are waiting for!” Winky gave her a look of pure gratitude and scampered off.

The house had room after room of dark wood wainscoting, paintings on every wall surface, whose inhabitants greeted them gladly, and comfort just oozing from every nook and cranny. “We could spend a decade just getting to know all these people in the paintings!” Harry grinned.

“Your grandfather and grandmother Potter are in the private study, Master” Tippy told him, matter of factly. “Potter Manor was their favorite home.”

“Wow – I can finally meet some of my grandparents!” Harry was beside himself.

They made their way upstairs, joined by Winky who proclaimed the kitchen to be very satisfactory. The bedrooms and baths were all tastefully decorated and furnished, and again, absent of personal belongings. Harry couldn’t wait to move in.

After sharing a lunch the elves brought over from Godric’s Hollow, Harry pondered what to now do with all his properties. “Tippy? Can I ask Cookie and yourself to stay at Godric’s Hollow? And Icy, Kiki, and Lolly, could you now stay here and keep this place going? I’m sure you will need even more help with the grounds, so feel free to find more elves.” They all nodded in happy agreement.

The group went to the private study where Hermione happily inspected the books while Harry introduced himself to his grandparents. Elves throughout the years had kept them informed what was happening in the wizard’s world, so they were delighted to finally meet their famous grandson. After a good couple of hours of chatting while the elves and Hermione explored the house more, Harry got ready to say his good byes when his grandfather spoke out.

“Before you go, Harry, I do have a favor to ask of you.” The gray haired hazel eyed wizard smiled down at him hopefully.

“Sure Grandpa – ask away!” Harry was really enjoying having a family, even if they were rather two-dimensional.

“Harry, in the library is a portrait of Joan Potter, your great great great aunt, give or take a couple greats” he said. “She was a witch known for her sharp wit and intellect. Sadly, for some unknown reason, her soul on death decided to inhabit her portrait, instead of going beyond or becoming a ghost. I am concerned for her well-being – it’s rare to have a soul in a portrait, and very hard on the person concerned. Do you think you could take her with you?”

“Really, Grandpa? Mum and Dad are in their portraits too – I’m sure they would love some company.” Harry recalled how awkward threesomes could be at times, and thought maybe Sirius in particular would appreciate some company, even if it was an elderly lady.

His grandfather looked amazed. “Lily and James chose to stay in their portraits at Godric’s Hollow? I never expected that!” He looked a bit nauseated, if the truth was told.

“Well, not at first. They did go beyond, but I brought them back with me after a visit – long story” Harry shrugged casually. Both his grandparents raised their eyebrows. “Hey – I had sort of a rough childhood, and evidently the ‘powers-that-be’ decided to send some guidance back with me.”

Harry, with Dobby’s help, found the library. He started examining the few portraits in the room, where Hermione was now curled up on a comfy leather sofa pouring over some books, but couldn’t see anyone that looked old enough to be a great great anything. Finally, he cleared his throat to get the portraits attention (and Hermione’s in the process) and asked “I need to speak to the painting that has her soul?” It felt strange to ask.

“That’s me” came a voice from the wall with the fireplace. Harry turned around and gaped. He was expecting an old woman, and the lady in the portrait was young – in her twenties at the latest, with a

beautiful face and figure, but dressed in a style a few hundred years old.

Harry walked over, joined by the ever-curious Hermione. “Wow – you are my great great great aunt?” She nodded with a smile. “I’m Joan Potter. And you are...?”

“Er, Harry. Harry Potter. My grandparents in the study said you were in here. I have three portraits at my home that have their souls. Would you like to join them? I’d be glad to take you with us when we return. We won’t be moving here until Hermione and I are married when the war is over.”

“Could you bring the painting of Potter Manor to my left? I usually stay there, and if you have friends in the same situation as myself, they will need places to stay.” She sounded a touch anxious, like a person with an itch they hadn’t been able to scratch for quite some time.

“No prob, Aunt Joan” Harry started to take down the two paintings. “They already have a painting of Godric’s Hollow, but we could start on a whole town for you guys if you want.”

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

It was the last week of July and everyone was relaxing in Godric’s Suitcase. Sirius and the Potters were thrilled to be joined by Aunt Joan and Potter Manor, and the four of them got along fabulously. Sirius and Joan, in particular, hit it off immediately.

Dumbledore was pacing his office and shooting impatient glances at the fireplace, so Harry was assuming he was waiting for an important visitor. He propped his feet on the Malfoy the Ottospam, giving it a good kick on occasion, and begged popcorn from Winky using his extremely unfair puppy-dog eyes.

After a wait Ex-Minister Fudge entered the headmaster’s office through the floo. He was looking haggard, stressed and angry despite being out of work for a while. His skin had an unhealthy gray pallor to it, and the pouches under his eyes and chin had sagged and multiplied. He glanced over at Dumbledore and sank heavily in the

conjured chair, grabbing the bowl of tainted lemon drops without waiting for the customary offer.

***“How are you, Cornelius?”*** The Headmaster twinkled his best grandfatherly pseudo-affectionate look at the man

***“How do you think?”*** Fudge shot back impatiently. ***“Little old witches and children kick me in the shins on the street, everyone is going on and on about how wonderful that bat Bones is and nobody of any importance will give me the time of day.”*** The man was practically pouting.

***“Have you thought about what I said in our last meeting?”*** Dumbledore’s eyes were glittering shrewdly, watching him down candy after candy.

“Hey guys – you might want to listen to this!” Harry called over his shoulder. His three friends swiftly came over and joined him on the couch.

***“I’ve thought of nothing else”*** Fudge growled at him, popping lemon drops despite the glazed look in his eye. ***“Do you think it would work?”***

***“Depends upon your self”*** the headmaster answered carefully. ***“I know some of the aurors are still loyal to you, and others could be, ah, persuaded through magical means. Not everyone is taken with the new Minister, nor with my ‘Golden Boy’. It would not take much to amass a large enough group to discredit them both.”***

“Whu...?” Neville blurted out. The four of them watched Dumbledore with steely looks.

***“Everyone who remembers Grindelwald will follow me. Everyone who remembers Voldemort during the first war will follow me. I don’t want the Ministry – I want to stay here, in Hogwarts. I can do much more good for the wizarding world from here. Bones is too stubborn to take advice and I feel much more comfortable with you in that position.”*** Dumbledore sat back, looking pleased with him self.

*After the headmaster's speech Fawkes, his phoenix, trilled loudly. It was not a song of comfort or triumph, but had the distinct sound of a warning. The bird gave Dumbledore a pointed look and turned his back to him.*

***"What's with your bird?"** Fudge asked abruptly.*

***"Oh, it must be close to burning day"** Dumbledore said dismissively*

***"Hmmm"** Fudge nodded. **"What about Potter? The public is crazy about that kid. All he would have to do is mention in passing 'hey – being Minister of Magic would be fun' and BAM – the public would have him there. I don't trust anyone with that kind of popularity."***

*The ancient wizard raised an eyebrow, and the four could distinctly hear him say in his thoughts "as could I, you silly fool". But he comforted the man with **"I'm not sure what Potter's plans are after school. The best I can tell through occlumency is that he doesn't expect to survive the battle with Voldemort, which quite frankly I agree with."***

***"I thought you were training him to fight that loon"** Fudge said, sitting up straighter and looking at him.*

***"Yes, yes"** Dumbledorebroke in, obviously irritated, **"but he's proving to have a very stubborn streak, and quite rebellious against authority. If he succeeds in taking out Voldemort, I will make sure his reputation is besmirched to the point that he will have to go into hiding."** "First thing I'm going to do" his thoughts came thought clearly, "is going to negate any birth control spells Miss Granger is using the moment I see her. Pregnant out of wed lock will not go over well with most of his older adoring public."*

*Harry stood up, clenching his fists. "What a paranoid, crazy, manipulative old coot!" he spat.*

*Hermione looked at the canvas with loathing. "Too bad we aren't doing anything that could get me pregnant. Luna and I will check into those kinds of hexes to make sure it will not harm anyone *not* using*

birth control spells. We will also research stronger passive shields for the four of us and our friends.” Luna nodded in agreement.

Fudge at this point was too high on lemon drops to be much use, so Dumbledore herded him toward the fireplace. Harry saved the memory of the conversation into Neville’s penseive, and started to draw up a plan on whom to share it with. Harry knew Tonks could take it to the aurors and get them protection from Dumbledore, and Remus would handle the Order. What about other magical beings?

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The next morning Harry and Neville woke to a couple of ballistic witches jumping on their beds.

Harry flung himself upright, but stopped just short of hexing the woman he loved, who giggled like crazy.

“Don’t worry, dear, I’ve got plenty of shielding charms on us. GET UP! Oh, and Happy Birthday!”

Laughing, the boys kicked the girls out of their bedroom, showered and dressed. With all the excitement of the summer, they had completely forgotten their birthdays – Neville’s was today, Harry’s tomorrow. Grinning with anticipation, they flung open their bedroom door to find the trunk crowded with friends and a party going full-tilt.

Remus and Tonks were there, leaning over the penseive with dark expressions on their faces. Hagrid, the twins, the ghosts, Griphook, the elves and even Snape (looking extremely uncomfortable) were there, eating and drinking butterbeers.

The penseive made the rounds, and the tone of the party flip-flopped between buoyant and angry. It was one thing for a room full of suspicious people to have their hunches confirmed, and another thing altogether to convince the rest of the world that their suspicions are right. Although Harry was happy to be with his friends, and impatient to get rid of Tom Riddle, he found himself floundering in despair about Dumbledore and Fudge, though to a far lesser degree. At this point Riddle had the potential to be dangerous, but he hadn’t done much lately – the loss of most of his Death Eaters had really hit him

hard. But how could Harry fight the wizard who has been the hero of the magical world for the last 120 years? And a wizard so powerful and immoral that he would obliterate or manipulate anyone and anything to get his way?

The party wound down and the well wishers were slowly escorted home by various elves that popped them back to where they came from. Neville and Harry had a pile of various cool gifts – it wasn't everyday one came of age. When the room was finally empty of everyone but the four friends, Dobby, Winky, Tippy and Cookie, Tippy glided his 'wheelchair' over to Harry and gently cleared his throat.

"My Lord, your parents asked me to find this for you at Godric's Hollow. They want you to have it, now that you are of age." He handed Harry a box, about the size of football but square, and wrapped.

Harry glanced over at his parent's portraits with a smile, which was returned warmly. He tore the paper off in excitement, to find a silvery diadem carefully wrapped in soft cloth. It was brilliantly polished – almost painful to look at, with a single large ruby in the front, and made to be worn like a headband. He looked at his parents curiously.

His father cleared his throat – obviously his parents were feeling a bit emotional. "That was Godric Gryffindor's. You really are his heir, Harry. It's been passed down father to son for generations, presented when the son turns of age. Although it hasn't been needed or used in hundreds of years, your mother and I feel sure you do and will."

Harry was speechless. He reverently held the circlet in his hands, turning it this way and that, staring at it in awe.

"Try it on, Harry" Neville suggested. Harry looked at his parents, who nodded in agreement. He placed the diadem on his head, and gave a small gasp. He felt as if every cell in his being was bursting from magic overload. He flung his head back, spreading his arms and legs as he glowed with energy that was almost painful. He fell heavily on the floor after a short while and regained his feet.

"Whoa" he muttered. "That was intense." He took the circlet off and held it with respect.

“What just happened, Harry?” Hermione looked at him fearfully. “Are you ok?”

With a shake of his head, Harry smiled. “Yah – I’m fine. It seems to fill you with amazing strength. I feel like I could run three marathons and cast a hundred patronis’s! The feeling is gone when I take it off.”

“When you go to battle with Riddle” James Potter spoke solemnly, “be sure to wear it. Most of the time it will merely be a piece of jewelry that is a tad formal for everyday wear. But when one has the need, it will actually take magic from the surrounding area to assist your own.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Winky and Dobby were cleaning up from the party, and Harry and Neville were snuggling on the sofa with their fiancés when a soft pop was heard. They turned around and were surprised to see Lady Hogwarts herself standing in Godric’s Suitcase. She gave them stately curtsy.

“Lady Hogwarts! I didn’t know you could appear like this out of the painting!” Neville raced over and took her hand. He had the hardest time of all of them coming back to the future.

She smiled lovingly at the bearded wizard and to the rest of them. “Yes, I don’t choose this form often – it limits me too much. But the founders wished me to present their birthday gifts to you.”

She held out her arms, and with a snap of her wrists was holding two long, impossibly shiny silver swords set with gems. Harry recognized the one as Godric’s own sword – the one he had killed the basilisk with in his second year.

The personification of the castle approached Neville, who instinctively knew to kneel. With formal grace she took one of the swords and gently knighted him and raised him to his feet. Handing him the blade she said “arise Sir Longbottom, Lord over that which grows green and runs with fur around this place of learning.”

Neville felt himself overflowing with magic – almost as if he would explode from it. He studied the blade she handed him. It was the

mirror image of Harry's sword, except it had Helga's name engraved on it and was set with large stones of amber and jet. He nodded in mute acceptance and stepped to the side.

Lady Hogwarts approached Harry who knelt down. She took the sword of Gryffindor, and knighted him, saying "arise Sir Potter-Black, Lord over all that is magical around this place of learning."

As when he put on Godric's diadem, Harry felt himself again filled with magic.

She turned to Luna and Hermione. "We haven't forgotten you, sisters of our fight. Although it is late for your birthday, Hermione, and early for yours, Luna, the need is now. Come here, Hermione."

Hermione knelt down in front of Lady Hogwarts. The granite woman snapped her wrists again, and in them appeared a slender sword and a shield with radiant shine. With the sword she knighted the girl, saying "arise, Lady Granger, Lady over all that slithers, swims, and creeps."

The newly knighted witch accepted the sword and gazed at it in wonder. It was shorter than Neville's and Harry's, more slender in the blade, and decorated with emeralds of amazing clarity and size. It was a weapon to be used in close quarters, stealthily and thoughtfully – not a sword for brute strength.

It was Luna's turn. "I will use Harry's blade, with his permission" Hogwarts reached over to him, and he gladly handed the glittering sword back. Knighting Luna, she said "arise Lady Lovegood, Lady over all that flies, and all that visits our dimension from others. This shield will block any spell directly thrown at it. Use it to protect the four of you in battle. The three blades will shield and deflect most hexes without casting a spell, though not the *Avada Kedavra*. The shield will deflect anything."

The four lined up; still overwhelmed with awe from the seriousness of the gifts they were given. Lady Hogwarts gave them a smile of encouragement and love. "You are the hope of the magical world, my friends. You are the hope for the future of this school. The final battle is coming, at the time of your choosing. Choose well. Wear these

objects of great history when that battle comes, or when you need to prove your lineage to the founders.”

With that, she faded away, back into the very fabric of the castle.

## Chapter 28

### Clip Clop

Harry was sitting in the trunk, working on a table set up next to their potion's station. He had finished smoothing and sanding 24 yew shafts, and was currently transfiguring silver and gold coins into sharp and well-balanced arrow heads. His intention was to make two dozen arrows, like he had learned to make under the centaurs, which would be an appropriate gift to start discussions with Magorian, Ronan and Bane. Seeing how angry the centaurs were during his fifth year, Harry knew it would take careful negotiations and special attention to rituals and customs to even start to repair the damage done.

On the table was an assortment of brightly colored gut strings for attaching the fletching. The dyes used on these were both magical and symbolic to the man-horse race. There was also a good selection of feathers, from Hedwig (snowy owls have exceptionally silent flight), thestrals and Luna's animagus form. But one bird was missing - it would be the finishing touch to have an arrow with golden arrowhead and phoenix fletching.

Once the arrowheads were formed, hardened with magical fire, and charmed for accuracy in flight, Harry set them aside. He turned his chair around to face the 'telly' and looked at Dumbledore with thoughtful eyes. Fawkes, sitting behind the ancient's left shoulder, was looking miserable on his perch. The magical bird kept looking at Dumbledore longingly, drooping with tangible depression that the wizard was either ignoring or unaware of.

"Oh Fawkes" Harry spoke quietly, but with sincere sorrow, "I wish I could help you. Are you bound to that man? He is totally ignoring all the help you are trying to give him."

The words were no sooner spoken, when Fawkes threw his head up with a triumphant trill and disappeared, leaving his perch a smoldering slag of melted metal and burnt wooden ash. Dumbledore spun around in his chair in shock and anger, gaping at the remains of his phoenix's perch.

***“Fawkes! Where did you go? Come here this instant!”***

Dumbledore was sputtering and shouting. Harry and his friends all walked over to watch the spectacle. ***“That is enough, you stupid bird! I’ve had enough of your pouting and telling me what to do!”*** With that, the headmaster picked up a bowl of lemon drops from his desk and threw them with childish spite at the smoldering wreckage that was once a bird’s perch.

As the young witches and wizards stood staring at Dumbledore’s tantrum, the trunk was filled with the magical strains of phoenix song. Harry had the pleasure of hearing it several times now, but for Hermione, Neville and Luna, this was the first time they heard the amazing sound. They felt their hearts gladden, like salt had been added to the flavor of their souls. Fawkes appeared with a short burst of flame and landed on Harry’s shoulder. He stroked the bird with wonder, feeling the warmth of his feet, and devouring the scarlet of his plumage with his eyes.

*“Did you hear me, Fawkes?”* Harry asked the bird with telepathy, feeling he was probably able to understand him. Fawkes looked him in the eyes, blinked slowly, and answered in a likewise manner.

*“Albus Dumbledore has refused my guidance for the last time, Harry Potter. I choose to keep your company now.”*

All four could hear the phoenix and nodded in shocked agreement.

*“Thank you, Fawkes. Help me to always pay attention to your advice.”* Harry told him reverently.

*“Use these on your gift to the centaurs, Harry.”* The phoenix reached his head around and pulled a primary wing feather from each of his wings, and dropped them in Harry’s hand.

*“Thank you, Fawkes. This is a most precious addition to the gift.”*

Luna conjured a new perch for Fawkes, asking his advice on how he wanted it and where. With a trill of approval, the phoenix flew on to it while Harry took the feathers and started to fletch the precious magical arrows. Luna was amused to see Fawkes insisted on the perch being placed where he could watch the telly easily.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The new founders were sitting around lunch the next day. Winky had taken quite a shine to Fawkes, who seemed to adore the attention she gave him. A bowl of fresh exotic greens and fruits was attached to his perch, and she was taking careful note of what Fawkes was telling her about his likes and dislikes. Fairies were still flying around the phoenix in greeting, which didn't seem to bother the bird in the least. They quickly learned that this phoenix enjoyed recognition and appreciation. He wasn't vain, but had spent many decades being taken for granted.

There was a serious discussion going on about the final battle. Lady Hogwarts had made it clear they would choose the time and place.

"That's easy" Harry said around a mouthful of BLT. "I can contact Ol' Tom anytime I want through our link. I can manipulate his thoughts, if necessary, to put him in enough of a temper that he will come and meet me, no matter what. But I do feel there are other things we want to do first."

Neville nodded in agreement. "Yah – we want to make sure we have a large army ready to take care of whatever dark army he's gathered at this point. I'm going to talk with the gnomes tomorrow – see if they will spy on Riddle Manor for us and let us know what manner of demons he's got working for him."

"Excellent idea, Nev" Hermione replied. "I'm planning on taking some time with the merfolk. I don't know if Riddle has water demons working for him, but I want them ready to defend themselves, and see if they will offer assistance from the lake."

"I'll visit Hagrid and see what is going on with the giants" Luna added. "But please don't underestimate Tom – he *is* one of the most powerful wizards in the world."

Harry leaned back in his chair. "Why don't we visit the centaurs as a group? They are impressed with unity and group dynamics. I think four founder's heirs; in full regalia bearing gifts will make for better communications. Let me run down customs of the centaurs with you guys first."

**O0o0o0o0o0o**

The group popped to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, barely out of sight of the castle and Hagrid's Hut. Hogwarts and the house-elves had promised to keep Dumbledore busy so he wouldn't get any sense of students on the grounds.

It was a serious foursome, all wearing their best dragonhide armor (Harry had replaced the twins' vest with a more serious looking one) under open cloak with their Hogwart's weapons proudly displayed. Godric's diadem was resting on Harry's head, keeping his untidy hair back from his eyes, jagged scar showing like a badge of honor, Fawkes sitting on his shoulder. He was carrying the gift arrows resting on a dragonhide quiver in a ceremonial bundle, and strength and pride shone in all their eyes.

With Harry in the lead, they entered the forest. It wasn't long before they found themselves surrounded by angry and fierce looking centaurs, fists clenched and bows drawn. "Humans!" the largest of the herd hissed. "Why do you dare enter our wood? How is it you have Albus Dumbledore's phoenix with you?"

Harry approached the huge being, meeting his eyes calmly, standing tall. "Magorian" Harry addressed the leader of the herd, speaking in the centaur tongue, *"I bring a gift to the leader of the herd, that you might hear our words and consider them."* He held out the precious arrows and quiver to the roan bodied centaur.

The centaurs gathered around the gift Harry had placed in Magorian's arms, inspecting the arrows carefully. The leader gave Harry a sharp, decidedly unfriendly look. "Where did you get these from, human? They are made by our kind, but are not our work."

Harry answered calmly in their language *"I crafted them myself, Magorian. I learned from your forefathers, through the Founders."*

The centaurs looked at each other, stamping their hooves in nervousness. Magorian eyed him darkly. "Why does the phoenix of Dumbledore sit upon your shoulder?"

Fawkes trilled sharply. *"I am not a possession, but my own being. Albus Dumbledore has lost the backing of Hogwarts. The Founders themselves have named these four as their heirs and the new Headmasters. I opt to follow The Chosen One."*

The centaurs, still stomping, eyed the shield and swords of the founders the humans carried with familiar grace. "What is it you want, humans?" Bane asked them, distrust dripping from his voice.

"To speak with you. I wish to open communication with the centaur race again, and heal wounds caused by the human race." Harry had switched back to English so he wouldn't have to translate telepathically for his friends. He didn't want the centaurs to get any indication of underhandedness.

Magorian nodded at Harry and Fawkes. "Your gift is accepted. Follow us." The centaurs turned and clopped down the trail, not looking back.

Harry felt the phoenix's hot feet squeeze his shoulder in encouragement. *"Fawkes, why is it that I never knew you could speak until you left Dumbledore?"* He asked him telepathically. *"And how is it you can speak with the centaurs?"*

*"Harry Potter, you never spoke to me before yesterday. I can understand most languages, but the beak is not made for communication. Lips are much better for that. Hence I do not talk to people until I know they can speak back. Very few can. You knew I was intelligent ever since we first met. The centaurs mind-speak like many other citizens of the magical world."*

Harry pondered a moment before asking his next question. *"Did Dumbledore speak with you like we do?"*

*"He had the ability but never tried. He never saw me as much more than a very smart, very useful pet."* There was deep longing and sorrow in the bird's voice.

*"How long have you been with him, Fawkes?"* Harry asked kindly. He could feel the depth of emotion in back of the phoenix's words, and it broke his heart.

*"I came to him during the war of the 40s, when the light was faltering. I gave Albus the gift of enhancing his strength and courage to defeat Grindelwald. When a phoenix bonds with someone, they do not leave easily. Our hearts are loyal and we are very patient."*

The young wizard frowned as he stepped over a tree root, pointing it out to his companions. *"Fawkes, could you tell me, when did he go bad?"*

Sorrow radiated off the bird. Harry hoped the centaurs couldn't feel it, as it had nothing to do with them. *"I think it was when he started using the philosopher's stone. It never affected Nicolas that way, but something about it wasn't compatible with Albus. Or perhaps it was Albus' motives for extending his life that turned him – I'm not sure. Nicolas created the stone because he had so many great inventions he was working on and didn't want to stop his work. Nicolas has done so much for the magical world that he will never get recognition for. He was a great wizard. Albus wanted to extend his life to protect the magical world, and have time to share his experience with the next generation. It slowly changed into an attitude that nobody could do what he did, so he had to stay and be the hero."*

*"It must have been so painful for you to watch, Fawkes."* Harry sympathized. *"I don't know how you handle being immortal. I don't know why people want it."*

*"You are wise, young Harry. Phoenix were created to be immortal – it is a burden at times, but it is what we are. People are not meant to live forever – except for a very few individuals, unnaturally long lives will only warp and destroy."*

The centaurs ahead of the group broke through the thick trees into a clearing, the wizards and witches close behind. Harry looked around in astonishment – in the large clearing was a town of centaurs, far different from his experience in the founder's time. There were no buildings, as such, but shelters built by training trees and saplings and vines to grow into natural shelters from the elements. The only furniture was tables and occasional beds, though most centaurs slept standing up. Possessions seemed to be few – they could see cooking equipment, occasional weapons, and a few toys for the children.

There was a community library by the look of one shelter. For the most part the centaurs seemed to be free from the bonds of ownership.

Hermione was enraptured with the babies. Children galloped through the clearing, kicking up their heels throughout the village. Everywhere they turned, centaur adults were watching the humans with varying expressions of curiosity or hostility. The young centaurs stopped their games and stood staring at them, sizing the wizards up.

Magorian stopped at a large wooden platform in the center of the village. "We understand humans can not stand for hours like our people, so feel free to sit on this platform. It will keep you level with us as we stand." He clapped his hands and a young horse maid cantered forward with a large tray of wooden cups and jugs of beverage.

"My daughter, Alfreida" Magorian introduced the pretty girl who handed around the cups and filled them with what appeared to be water. Harry and his friends nodded in greeting – bowing was unacceptable to centaurs, who were incapable of bending at the waist to that degree, and saw it as a sign of submissive weakness.

The group settled on the platform, using bundles of sweet smelling leaves various centaurs brought over for them for cushions. There must have been fifty centaurs standing near, ready to join the discussion. Magorian leapt gracefully onto the platform next to Harry and spoke to the group in English.

"Fellow centaurs, these four humans come with my protection to tell us of the events that are happening in their world. They come to tell us of events that have happened in the past. They wish to repair the damage done in our relationship with humankind. I have agreed to hear them out, and ask you to do the same. As this was foretold by the position of Jupiter and its moons, we need to hear and to ponder."

The group assembled around the platform stomped their hooves in agreement, some less enthusiastically than others.

Harry stood up and addressed the crowd. "Noble centaurs, herd of Magorian, thank you for your patience and wisdom. No where can

one find beings with the depth of the centaur, the knowledge of years. My name is Harry Potter. The wizards know me as Lord Harry Potter-Black, the Goblins have named me Furybolt. The magical world has given me the title of The Chosen One.”

The centaurs grew silent. Neither a hoof nor voice was heard.

He continued with his speech. “There are two important issues to discuss with you. First is the relationship of wizard and centaur, which has been badly wounded over the years, festering in recent time. I wish to hear from you what can be done to restore what once was in the time of the Founders. The second issue is the current war in the magical world. Although the centaur is not involved at the moment, I feel it is necessary to let you hear of current events and how it will affect your people. Which do you wish me to speak of first?”

An elderly female centaur with dappled flanks stepped forward. “I wish to hear who your friends are, and how you all carry weapons of the Founders. Centaurs have always respected the Founders – we need to know you have not stolen these treasures.” Her expression was stern and a touch hostile.

“The Founders brought us back to their time, to teach us the ways of magic not being taught currently at Hogwarts. These weapons are their gifts for the coming battle. That is where I learned the ways of the centaur.” Harry spoke solemnly. He gestured to his friends who stood up and introduced themselves, as he sat down.

“I am Hermione Granger, heir of Slytherin. I have been trained as ambassador to the Merpeople.” Hermione spoke clearly to the crowd. Neville and Luna introduced themselves in like fashion, as ambassadors to gnomes and ambassador to the fairies. The three then sat down.

The centaurs spoke among themselves for a bit, debating whether to hear about the war or the rift between centaur and human first. As they were speaking in their own tongue, Harry was the only one who could understand them, but didn’t bother to translate much as they seemed to guardedly trust the foursome and not be talking about anything else. After a good discussion, the majority agreed to hear current events first.

Harry stood again. "As you know, the stars told of the coming of the present evil in the land. The one who calls himself Voldemort, Tom Riddle, has started the second war. For a time the battle was going badly, with many wizards and muggles slaughtered without warning or provocation. Riddle has backed off some, due to losing many of his Death Eaters who are imprisoned where he cannot break them free. But rumor says he has started to recruit the demons to use as his forces."

The centaurs gasped and whispered among themselves.

"What does this have to do with us, *human*?" Bane spoke up. Always aggressive and mistrusting of men, pure hate and arrogance shown on the centaur's face.

"Riddle hates all things non-wizard" Harry spoke calmly, looking Bane in the eyes unflinchingly. "Although he will approach all magical beings for help in his fight, he has no respect for any who are not pure blood wizard. That is ironic, as he is a half-blood himself. He has made his plans clear to his close followers that once he wins the war and is in full control, he will slowly destroy everything that isn't wizard. That includes the giants, the Merpeople, the fairy, the elf, the gnome and yourselves."

"How do you know his plans?" Magorian asked skeptically.

"We are connected through my scar. The stars have told you some of this. I can hear his thoughts when I choose, but he has no access to mine anymore. The Goblins and elves helped me perfect the link." Harry watched the centaurs look at his forehead with nervousness, muttering among them selves.

"So" Bane sneered at Harry, "you are asking us to choose sides?"

"Time is asking you to choose sides, Bane" Harry stated. "War is at the edge of your meadow. Soon the day will come when the battle arrives, and you will have no time to debate and search the stars for an answer. You must decide soon. I will not ask you to follow me – I am not your leader. I have been foretold by destiny to take down Riddle, and I will do that soon. What I ask you is to not aid Riddle when he sends delegates to whisper sweet promises in your ears.

That would be scattering your forest paths with sharp stones. The mighty centaur of the wood are their own masters, and warriors of fame. Your help against Riddle and his demons would be invaluable to the preservation of the magical world.”

Bane shot Harry a look of pure hate, but the others in the crowd pondered his words thoughtfully. Luna looked around the clearing and mused “Harry, I think you need to check for Dumbledore’s influence.” He nodded in agreement and subtly rubbed his Potter ring.

To his amazement almost every bow the centaurs carried had one spell or another on them. Many were charmed for loyalty to Dumbledore, many others hexed for distrust of anyone other than the headmaster. At this rate Harry was fighting a losing battle.

The Chosen One spoke up again. “I wish to show you something that might work against me in your eyes. There is more to this story that I will tell in a moment, but first, with your permission, I’d like to perform the Goblin spell to reveal any enchanted objects in the vicinity.”

Bane snarled at Magorian “How do we know that is what he is casting? He could be attacking.” Magorian frowned deeply, eyeing Harry and his friends.

“This spell will simply cause enchanted objects to glow with colors that can be interpreted. If you wish, I can bring Goblind to do so if you prefer. You may have your bows drawn and aimed at me – I know your hearts are true and you will not fire without reason.” Harry felt Hermione fill with emotions of worry toward him, but he sent her soothing feelings in return.

Magorian cleared his throat. “Go ahead. We will not draw bow unless you pull your swords or wands.”

Harry waved his fingers in Goblin spell casting around the clearing. The bows and quivers started to show their red and blue auras for everyone to see. The gift arrows glowed gold, and various objects around the camp had different color auras, but the tainted weapons shown the brightest.

“What are the meanings of these curses?” The elderly centaur spat angrily. “Who has done this to us?” The crowd started shouting and shaking fists at the sky and the four on the platform.

Fawkes broke into song. His trills lifted to the tops of the trees, swelling in the air and in everyone’s hearts. Anger and distrust was instantly muted, and after many deep breaths the crowd settled down. “Thanks, Fawkes” Harry said softly and sincerely.

Magorian said “please interpret for us.” His arms were folded over his chest, but he kept glancing at the blue glowing bow slung at his side.

“The blue is an enchantment of loyalty.” Harry took a breath, knowing the centaurs might not believe or like what he was about to say. “Albus Dumbledore cast that so people in its vicinity would feel trust and devotion to himself. The red is a hex to enforce distrust and even hatred of any human other than Albus Dumbledore. I can remove these curses if you wish, and you should feel an immediate effect.”

“Hmmm” Magorian pondered. “Not just yet.” The powerful centaur took a silver horn hanging from his human hip and blew a loud, shrill note that seemed to travel to the ends of the world, slowly dying in the far distance. On the platform next to Harry two figures appeared – King Flailhide and Griphook.

The Goblin King lightly jumped from the platform and walked confidently up to the leader of the centaurs. “Magorian, my friend. Meet my comrade Griphook. How may I be of service?” Harry and his friends immediately knelt and moved their hair for submissive beheadings, but were motioned to stand again.

Griphook walked up to Harry, with a polite nod at Hermione, Neville and Luan, and clapped his hands on Harry’s shoulders. “How does it go, my son?” he asked softly.

“It’s going ok, Father. You can see the auras I revealed. Dumbledore has been messing with these guys too, and we are trying to repair relations between wizard and centaur.” Harry watched the crowd expectantly, hoping the Goblin king would smooth everything out.

“Flailhide, I need your assistance” Magorian greeted him. Griphook was examining the bow’s auras with interest from where he stood. “Harry Potter and his companions have been allowed to speak with us. What they are saying is disturbing, if not unexpected. Would you kindly look at these enchantments and tell me what they say?”

“Furybolt is fully trained in the Goblin way, and has our complete trust. He is, after all, Griphooks son.” The monarch looked at the centaurs with amusement, knowing full well they wanted a non-human opinion.

The centaurs stomped and muttered again, but with less hostility. Ronan said to the crowd “the Goblins have not adopted one not of their race in centuries. This is something to ponder, *if* it is true.”

Griphook eyed Ronan with a less than pleasant smile. “Furybolt is my son. He has trained three years, enchanted time, under me, and gained my trust and respect. He returned the sacred Dragon’s Ear to the Goblins, and gained the king’s trust and respect. We feel he is the Chosen One of prophecy. He is my son by choice.”

“The Dragon’s Ear was missing?” Magorian spoke with evident surprise. “When did this happen? How did Furybolt return it?”

Harry was pleased to hear Magorian refer to him by his Goblin name – that indicated a change in attitude. The centaurs might not like wizards, and had many reasons not to, but they got along with Goblins just fine.

“It was stolen by Mr. Albus Dumbledore. Furybolt learned earlier this year of some of the foul dealings his headmaster has been doing, and was able to recognize The Dragon’s Ear as a Goblin object, and returned it to us.” The king had a blaze of pride and fierceness in his eye – the loss of the Dragon Ear was not something the Goblins would forget or forgive easily.

Griphook examined an offered bow of each color and addressed the crowd of centaurs. “Mr. Dumbledore did this – it has his scent. The blue is to enforce loyalty to him, and the red is to create feelings of hostility toward humans, and, hum,” Griphook was waving his graceful fingers like crazy over the red-glowing bow. “It appears you are being, ah, persuaded to cut relations with one of your own?”

At this the centaurs howled, pawed the ground and shouted with rage. Harry shook his head sadly, speaking with his three companions. "It is rare that a centaur will disown one of its herd. The expulsion of Firenze was not the norm for the centaur world. The fact a human wizard would cause a shameful act like that will not go down well."

When the herd finally calmed down some, Magorian spoke. "Please, Griphook, will you and your son remove these curses from our bows? I will call Firenze to join us." He clapped his hands and ordered some horse maids to bring food for all, drew his silver horn again, and blew a long note on it. Harry and Griphook gladly got to work on removing the curses.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Albus Dumbledore was furious. Again. His blood pressure must have been off the charts this week. Everything was getting worse and worse.

Potter has disappeared. Potter was refusing his orders. The Minister of Magic was replaced without his consent. Fawkes, his beloved pet, was gone – evidently for good. And now Hogwarts was refusing to speak to him.

He should have noticed his powers waning. When did it start? He could easily recall *now* that Hogwarts was speaking to him less and less. Thirty years ago, give or take, when he became headmaster, Hogwarts was like a maiden in the bloom of a new relationship. They chatted constantly and seemed to gain energy from each other. Now she barely spoke a word to him – only the barest of communications, and only on matters critical to the running of the school.

If he didn't know better, he would say she was *angry* at him. Angry at he? He was Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot! How dare a stupid castle, or a stupid bird, or a stupid wizard council tell him what to do! Didn't they realize the world owed him? Didn't they understand nobody was old enough to see the big picture as he was? He shook his head in disbelief.

This was the icing on the caldron cake. Hogwarts had him imprisoned in his own office. The stairs refused to turn, and everyone knows you can't apparate inside Hogwarts grounds.

Albus had heard the long note of the centaur's horn calling their own, and he assumed they were calling Firenze. For what purpose, he did not know. It was probably to either execute the palomino divinations teacher, or to restore him back to the herd. Execution most likely, as he had woven one of his cleverer spells on Magorian's bow to keep the herd bickering. A united herd is a dangerous herd – he had done the correct thing.

The ancient rolled his eyes as he paced the floor angrily. How *dare* those stupid mules get all shirty about Firenze giving his boy a ride. He thought it made a smashing image, when the Golden Boy came trotting through the forest on centaur-back – that was why he planted the command in the centaur's mind. It had an added bonus – he had needed a new divination teacher. People were beginning to openly mock Slyvia.

Now WHEN was Hogwarts going to let him out of his office?

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

At last Firenze came trotting uncertainly into the village, hope and a touch of fear in his eyes. In short time Magorian calmed him and invited him to lunch with the group. Long discussions followed after the meal, where the centaurs agreed to break relations with Dumbledore, but welcome back Firenze into the herd. Magorian agreed to keep open communications with humans, as long as the new Founders were the spokespeople. He also promised not to attack any students found in the woods, as children should be free from the anger of politics.

When the discussions were finally at an end, the sun was starting touch the horizon and the forest was growing dark. Harry and his friends were given a friendly escort back to the edge of the forest, where Griphook and he said their goodbyes.

Magorian looked at Harry shrewdly. "Nobody likes to be controlled or manipulated against their will – not centaur, not goblin, not human. It

was your clear love and respect for your father and the kind conversation you had with Fawkes on the way here that gained our trust. Perhaps the time is indeed coming when all magical creatures can live as equals. The stars are hard to read.”

Harry smiled at Magorian. “Griphook is the best thing that has ever happened to me. He has taught me much, and taught me well. Once Riddle is defeated, I am going to confront Albus Dumbledore with his dealings, and then the wizard government. Too long have the wizards treated centaur, goblin, elf and gnome as animals, not beings. This must end.”

Magorian looked at Harry sharply. “Do you plan to take over the Ministry?”

“No – not at all.” Harry shook his head. “Leadership needs mature and experienced beings. My task from destiny is to defeat Riddle, and with my companions take over the leadership of Hogwarts. These tasks were given to me, foretold by prophecy and the stars. I will not walk beyond my appointed path. I don’t know what the far future brings, but leadership is currently far from my heart.”

“Here we are, Furybolt of the goblins. May our paths cross again soon.” With that, Magorian and his companions turned and trotted back into the forest. Not before Bane shot Harry a menacing, dark look over his shoulder. Harry and his friends popped back to the trunk.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

It was late morning of the day after the silver horn sounded from the forest. Hogwarts had finally released the stairs, much to Albus Dumbledore’s relief. Firenze was gone from the castle, so he thought he might take a stroll into the forest with Hagrid in a bit to talk with Magorian.

The birds sang sweetly, for the heat had not taken over the day yet. Dumbledore had thrown the casement windows in the office wide open to welcome the cool morning air and listen for more activity from the wood.

The headmaster sat down on his desk to organize some piles of parchment, when a 'ffffffttt' was heard and an arrow shot through his open window, vibrating with the impact where it stuck deeply into his desk, not one foot from his hooked nose.

Furious, Dumbledore rocked the shaft back and forth until he could dislodge it from his desk. It was certainly centaur in origin, and the black color and red wrappings on the fletching gave an unmistakable message.

If Albus Dumbledore set foot in the Forbidden Forest, his life was at forfeit. The centaurs did not welcome him anymore. He rubbed his arm in a daze. This week really stunk.

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## Chapter 29

### Splish-Splash

Hermione stood at the edge of the lake watching the squid lazily floating in the sun. The old oak tree by the lake was between the castle and herself, hopefully blocking her from view, and Dobby was in the castle making sure Professor Dumbledore was kept busy for the next half an hour or so. She had said her good byes to Harry and their friends. There was no telling how long this would take.

She swiftly charmed her wand and arm holster to not disappear like her clothing when she transfigured. With a quick backwards glance at the castle, she changed into a mermaid and sunk into the water, breathing in great gulps of liquid. As a child she would fantasize about being a mermaid, wondering how you could breathe in water without panicking. Well, now she knew – it simply felt right in this form.

She swam near the surface for a bit, enjoying the warmth of the water on her back and stretching her fins and tail, getting use to the new muscles. She swam near the squid which ducked under the surface of the lake and came close, looking her over with amazement.

*“I don’t recognize you. Are you new here?”* The squid spoke telepathically. Hermione pondered to her self that it was amazing how so many creatures did not need to speak audibly in the magical world.

*“Sort of” she answered back, smiling. “I’m a student at Hogwarts. I just learned I was part mermaid.”*

*“I haven’t seen one like you in years. And you are a founder’s heir! My my.”* the squid answered back. *“What brings you to the lake?”*

Hermione was enjoying herself. She had never wondered about the squid before – for some inexplicable reason she merely accepted there was a giant fresh-water squid living in the lake. She never even wondered if it was intelligent, or how many there were. There were no squid in the lake during the time she spent with the founders. She decided there was no reason not to be honest with the huge cephalopod.

*“The war on land brings me here. I wish to find out if the forces of dark have been in touch with the merpeople, and what the relationship is between merfolk and wizard.”*

The squid waved it's tentacles around in lazy enjoyment. *“It's been so long since I've spoken with anyone outside of the Merfolk School. Can we chat a bit? They don't seem to teach telepathy at Hogwarts anymore.”* The squid sounded sincerely sad and lonely.

*“Why sure. My name is Hermione. What's yours?”* Hermione did wonder for a moment if this was a dangerous thing to do – give her name to someone she didn't know. A big someone that could eat her, in all actuality. But she figured the chances of Riddle actually caring about the giant squid or the merpeople, were slim.

*“The headmaster named me Marvin. He brought me to the lake many, many years ago when he was just a fingerling. But he doesn't really talk with me, sort of ‘at’ me, if that makes sense.”*

*“Well, yes, Marvin it does.”* Hermione answered the squid sadly *“Headmaster Dumbledore doesn't speak telepathically. He probably doesn't realize you are intelligent. Why did he bring you here and from where?”*

The squid perked up at the promise of a long conversation. *“You know, Hermione, I agree – I don't think he does. How sad. When headmaster was young, he brought a whole tank of us to school from a local fish market. I don't remember a lot of my youth – we were small squid from the sea, and quite sickly by the time we came to Hogwarts. I remember how horrible the water was in that small clear box, and many of my companions died. Young headmaster changed us to fresh water creatures through magic. Sadly, I was the only one to survive. Perhaps I was the strongest, or it was just meant to be.”*

Hermione felt a bit sick as she shared the image of a small aquarium of cloudy water and panicking squids with Marvin. Were all fish and creatures sentient? Did she have to give up fish and chips and become a vegetarian?

*“Anyway, one night he brought me down to the lake, enlarged me to this size, and let me go. He commanded me not to hurt the*

*merpeople or the students, and to guard the lake from dark intruders. I have been doing that ever since. I also keep the carp population in check” and the squid distinctly giggled in her brain.*

*“You are all alone, poor friend?”* Hermione asked with pity.

*“Friend. Are we friends, Hermione of the land and lake?”* Marvin asked her hopefully. *“I love the merfolk, but they do not spend much time with me. I would like a friend. Perhaps that is what keeps beings alive – friendship.”*

Marvin was certainly a philosopher, Hermione mused. *“I would be honored to be your friend, Marvin.”* She swam up and stroked the tentacle he stretched out toward her. *“And when the school year starts, I have three friends, founders’ heirs too, who can talk with you also. They will be thrilled to meet you. Did you know the house elves can talk with you too?”*

*“I do listen in on elf chat a lot when I’m bored, but I don’t bother to speak with them any more. Elves are too busy to take time with a squid.”* Marvin said sorrowfully. *“Wait – all four of the founders are back? The merfolk will want to talk with you! Is Albus Dumbledore retiring?”*

Hermione looked in the giant eye of the squid that was facing her. *“Marvin, I will not lie to my friend. He is about to lose his job for not keeping with the desires of the founders. He has become more interested in politics and forgotten about the needs of his students.”*

*“Although I’ve only been here one hundred summers, Hermione, I’ve learned much of the history of Hogwarts from the merfolk. I don’t think they are very happy with headmaster. I have no qualms with him – if he hadn’t of changed me and brought me here, I would have been fish food decades ago. But times are changing.”* Marvin had a thoughtful look (for a squid) about him as he chatted.

*“Have any other wizards or witches been here lately to speak with them, Marvin?”* Hermione asked the squid.

*“No. There was a fingerling about 60 years ago that could talk with me – he was wonderful to chat with. His name was James. James Weasley. Other than him, it’s been the headmaster only.”*

*“Wow, Marvin” Hermione laughed, “James must have been the grandfather of several of the students now. There are seven Weasley brothers and sisters!”*

*“Are they as nice as you?” Marvin sounded beside himself with joy. “I have really missed chatting with people.”*

*“Some of them are wonderful, some not-so. The twins, who left school last year, would love to talk with you – I know they mind-speak. They are good friends of mine. The other three founders are wonderful friends – you will love them all.”* Hermione smiled at her new buddy. He was really a sensitive kind of guy. She looked the squid over for a bit and said *“Marvin, when the war is over, which will be soon, I promise to either return you to the ocean or bring you a companion – which ever you desire.”* I also will never eat calamari again, Hermione added privately to herself.

*“Oh Hermione – you have filled my heart with joy!”* Marvin gushed. *I’m pretty sure I can say I don’t want to return to the ocean – large or not, it’s rough out there. A companion! My soul is singing!”* Marvin actually spun in place, swirling his tentacles like a ballerina’s skirts. *“But not so many would die this time, right?”*

Hermione laughed. *“Marvin, I will learn about transporting fish, and will study it carefully so I don’t have anybody suffer. I promise. Now give me a tentacle to hug – I can’t hug your body very well. I need to speak to the merpeople about the war. I’ll chat with you a bit on the way back, and I promise when the school year starts I’ll be down here constantly.”* With a hug around the long squid-arm and a cheery wave, she swam deeper into the lake.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

As Hermione made her descent, she marveled at what it must have been like for Harry back during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Alone and terrified, with most of the school hating him, he took gillyweed for the first time, not knowing if it would work or not. She had a year of

living with merfolk, and knew how to deal with the reduced light and unpredictable water currents. She knew where the grindylows nested. She could speak the language of the merfolk. The man she loved had been through an awful trial and had done nothing to deserve it.

*"How did you do it, my love?"* Hermione pondered as she gently paddled her webbed fingers and flicked her finned tail.

*"Do what, chuck?"* Harry answered back through the elf network.

She smiled with delight. *"Sorry – didn't realize I was broadcasting. How did you manage under here during the tournament? I love it, but it's in my blood, and I've had lots of experience. You thought your friends would die if you goofed up... wow. You are amazing."*

*"Shucks – you make me blush. Never discount the power of adrenaline, my dear."* With a mutual laugh, they cut the connection.

Traveling along the dark lake bottom, Hermione pulled her narwhal wand from her holster and transformed it into a staff. She wanted to be sure the merpeople saw it from a good distance. Then she slowed her swimming to a more upright position, so any merfolk could see she, too, had a tail like they.

Soon enough the young witch found herself surrounded by surprised and friendly looking mermen and mermaids. They held spears and pitchforks, but were not brandishing them in a threatening way. The feeble sunlight glinted off their colorful scales, showing healthy beings in various shades of lilac, blue and green and their eyes were warm and friendly, despite their cold surroundings.

*"Hermione, heir of Slytherin, long has the merfolk waited for this day!"* The merfolk spoke in her mind in unison, swimming around her in dancing circles and gesturing for her to follow them. Brandishing her staff/wand in a customary greeting, she swam with them, playfully twirling in the water and laughing with them.

*"How do you know my name?"* she asked them curiously. She wondered if it was because she was one of the 'victims' in the Tri-Wizard tournament.

*"Come! Come!"* Many voices beckoned in her mind as they smiled and gestured for her to follow.

Speaking with merfolk was very much like elf communication. If you could do one, you certainly could do the other. It wasn't like goblin occlumency, as all your thoughts were not open to the person you were speaking with – it was a like talking on a telephone in your mind. The problem was that while you were speaking with merfolk, someone skilled in occlumency near by would have no problem listening in, and using it as a gateway into your private thoughts.

They entered the school's city, and Hermione found it impossible not to get caught up in the merfolk's excitement. Everyone was swimming out of houses, smiling and laughing, children swimming up shyly to gently touch her tail fin or hair. Obvious preparations for a celebration began at once as she followed happy mermaids and mermen into the 'town hall', for lack of a better word. And inside the hall was quite a shock.

The walls were covered with mosaics of famous merfolk from history far past and recent. Shiny and glittering, Hermione was amused to see pieces of glass, cans, bottles, plastic, - discarded trash from Hogwarts students and muggles alike used through out the works. It was far more embellished than in the founder's day. She was delighted to see the very mural she had started 200 years ago with Stoney and Kelpy. But the young witch was positively floored when she saw the first mural on the left – it was a very good portrait of herself.

*"But, how, I, I don't understand!"* she sputtered in her mind, gesturing at the mosaic rendition of herself.

The leader of the merfolk swam to the front of the greeting school. *"When you left us 200 years ago, our ancestors made this as a constant reminder that our friend Hermione would return in the future."*

Her swift mind put the pieces together. That was why Salazar looked so longingly at the water and did not join her, although he had transformed as well. A painting, even one made by the founders, could only hold so much magic. The magic in the Founder's

landscape was immense – enough to support giving the ghosts temporary bodies, keep the souls of the Founders alive, and support occasional guests. But it could not maintain a school of merfolk, a full herd of centaurs, or the many other magical creatures they learned of and with during those three magical years. Hermione had actually gone back in time during her stay with the merpeople of the lake. Poor Salazar could not travel with her, being a soul in a painting. He had not visited with them for centuries, and would never again.

Bringing her thoughts back to the present, the merfolk of Hogwarts Lake started assembling in the great hall, carefully seating Hermione in front of her mosaic likeness. Food was served – edible water plants, fresh water muscles, and non-sentient fish that had been steamed in thermal vents at the far end of the lake. She ate heartily, having forgotten how great raw and barely cooked seafood was. Harry wasn't convinced of that when she had told him the first time, although he did eventually develop a taste for sushi.

When the meal was finished, the leader introduced himself as King Falasir, and called for the concert to begin. Hermione sat back, most surprised and excited. When she had first met the merpeople back in Hogwart's time, she had to learn how to communicate with them. Mermaids and men do not have lungs, diaphragms, or vocal chords, so audible sound is not possible. They had a superior form of telepathy where a merperson could 'talk' to one person privately, a few, or everyone at once, and pretty much unconsciously direct the conversation accordingly. One day when Hermione was working with a mermaid, she was recalling a song she enjoyed to herself. The maid could hear it and was enraptured – nothing like music had ever been heard by the merpeople, and it was nothing that could possibly be duplicated by creatures underwater. Dumbledore had made the golden eggs from the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and it wasn't the merfolk tongue you heard when you opened them.

Hermione's recalled song spread like wildfire through the merpeople's minds, and Hermione spent many days recalling all kinds of music and songs for the merfolk. They learned to 'sing' along telepathically, and even duplicate instruments in their thoughts. It became a huge source of entertainment overnight.

Now, back in the present, Hermione was about to enjoy the inner-mind concerts again. It was actually much better to sing telepathically – if you can imagine it, it comes out perfectly for you every time. There was no such thing as a sour note, broken reed, or missed beat. Down here, in her thoughts, she was quite the musician! Aren't we all?

The music that started to swell in her brain was beyond description. In the two hundred years the merpeople had taken the simple songs and melodies and created their own art form that was simply divine. Imagine singing if you never had to take a breath. Now imagine singing if you never knew what it was to need that breath in the first place. There were no limitations of vocal range – the merfolk didn't base the melodies on how far a vocal cord could stretch, only on how far their imagination could fly. Again, the instrumentation that accompanied the perfect, surreal voices was missing the limits of the earthbound equivalents. 'Piano', if you could call it that, was now perfectly in tune, and if the keyboard was real, it would be six foot long, and played by a four-armed musician with incredibly long arms and eight fingers on each hand. Rhythm in the air-breathing world tended to be based on heart beats or breaths because it accompanied lung-driven voices. Now rhythm was free of all restraints and bonds.

Of course it was far, far after her visit that Hermione was able to analyze what she heard that day, and realize what made it so different. All she knew now was that she was hearing the most amazing, wonderful, pure melody she had ever heard, and would never be the same again. If she was able to cry, which merfolk weren't, she would be weeping with the beauty of the experience. If she could sit there for the rest of her life, listening, she would do so without a complaint. Perhaps this was the power of the harpies in mythology.

When the concert ended, and way too quickly in Hermione opinion, all eyes turned to her. She gracefully 'stood' with a flick of her tail and addressed the school.

*"Never did I imagine recalling one song back in Hogwarts time would lead to such a purity of art. You have touched my very being with*

*your magic – if there were not such pressing problems above, I would stay and beg for more.”*

*“How can you say that, Hermione, heir of Slytherin?”* The King and merfolk all looked puzzled. *“It was you that taught us music in the first place.”*

Hermione laughed. Comparing her music to theirs was like comparing a child’s toy piano playing ‘Jingle Bells’ with one finger to an orchestra performing a masterpiece. Yes, they are both music.... *“Good merfolk, you have taken the music I gave you and made it uniquely your own. You have surpassed the teacher by far!”*

The school of water people were pleased and flattered, if not a little disbelieving, and soon settled down for serious talk. The king started the conversation. *“What happens with the land dwellers? Dumbledore had spoken to us briefly last spring about trouble coming on the tides, but never came back to tell us more. We do hear from Myrtle on occasion, but as she stays in one room of the castle, her information is limited.”*

Hermione wished she could sigh. Or take a deep breath to start with. Some habits are hard to break. Not having her old ‘habit’ of oxygen or lungs, she chose to dive right in. *“The time is serious for the land-dwellers” she began, “and the final battle of good against evil in the wizard world is at hand. The Chosen One of prophecy is trained and ready to fight the leader of the dark, but waits to hear who will join him in that struggle. He has the power to defeat Riddle, or Voldemort as he likes to call himself, but we fear Riddle has called on the demons of the dark dimensions to aid him. We need all beings of the magical world to aid in sending these creatures back to where they came from.”*

*“We owe Hermione more than we can repay for the gift of song. What would you have us do? We would fight at your sides if we could breathe the air as you do.”*

To say Hermione was floored would be a crass understatement. Yesterday the centaurs, with pride and arrogance, had them jumping through hoops to ‘prove’ they were worthy of the man-horse help. Here the people of the lake heard her speak a few words and were

offering her anything and everything for help. But Hermione put on a professional face and answered *“Great people, wonderful musicians of the water. Your generosity and kindness has not changed in two hundred years, except to grow. I don’t know if Riddle will try to speak with you – most do not know the treasure of the water that lives here. But if he or an emissary does, please do not assist them. If demons of the water are called, please fight them and call on us to help.”*

*“Is that all? You must need more!”* The voices were crying from the crowd.

*“Beware of Dumbledore”* Hermione said sadly. *“The once great hero of the wizards has grown self-serving. He does not side with Riddle, but he is working against the Founders and the government of the wizards. Do not take council with him.”* It hurt her to say that, but she had to.

The King nodded at her. *“Over the years we have felt his heart grow cold. He barely speaks with us now, unless he needs something. We had hoped your great tournament would have opened the door between our people.”*

*“The door will be open soon. The Founders tasked my companions and I to take over Hogwarts as soon as the battle is over. Dumbledore will be retired, against his will if necessary, and we will ensure the students learn to communicate with the good people of the water.”*

Glittering fins were waved in approval – the merfolk equivalent of clapping and cheering. The meeting was a success.

Hermione spent a few days with the school, immersing herself in their music and love. She hated to leave, but felt she was merely being selfish, taking a vacation from the worries of above. With heartfelt thanks and promises to return soon, she started the ascent back to Hogwarts and Marvin.

Marvin greeted her with waving tentacles of joy. *“You’ve come back! I have been waiting, friend!”*

Hermione waved her fins in response. *"I promised I would, Marvin. I just spent three wonderful days with the school. They have agreed to help against Riddle."*

*"I'm not surprised. They have been anticipating the day you would return."* Marvin mused. *"Do all wizards live hundreds of summers like you?"*

*"Oh no – I'm only seventeen summers, Marvin!"* Hermione giggled, despite herself. *"I went back in time to learn about my powers and ancestry – that's how the merfolk knew me so long ago. It gets sort of confusing..."*

*"Time travel always does, Hermione. If you think about it too long, you tie your brain in knots like the kelp. Now how can I help in this war?"*

*"Oh Marvin – you are wonderful"* Hermione gushed. *"If you see dark creatures from other worlds, please let me know and do what you can to stop them. If Dumbledore comes asking for assistance, do not give it to him. And especially keep yourself safe from Riddle."*

*"You don't ask much, friend. What you request is freely given."*

After a nice long visit, Hermione headed back to the world of air, land, and gravity.

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## Chapter 30

### Scamper Scamper

It was the day after they met with the centaurs. Hermione had left to visit the merfolk in the lake, Harry was studying some ancient books on dark magic for ideas on how to combat it, and Luna had gone to Hagrid's.

Neville was finishing up the last of his coffee, pondering the coming battle. The reports that Riddle was using demons weighed heavily on him. He stroked his beard a few times and looked over at Harry. "Harry, I think I know how to find out what Riddle is recruiting" he called over to his friend. Harry looked up with interest, and set his book down as Neville walked over to join him on the couch.

"What's up?" Harry gratefully accepted a mug of coffee from Winky and propped his feet on 'Malfoy the Ottospam'. He sat up abruptly, removed his feet and muttered "oh – I forgot." With a flick of his hand, his feet were properly covered in mud, and he put them back on the much abused footrest.

"Do you think he's still at Riddle Manor?" Neville asked him, accepting another mug from the house-elf.

"Yes – I keep checking on him, and I haven't seen any signs of moving, and I recognize the graveyard outside of his window." Harry winced, recalling the pain and despair of his fourth year, when his friend Cedric was killed and he was forced to participate in the rebirth of the evil wizard.

"Well, I'm sure I can ask the gnomes to keep tabs on what is going in and out of the place. You said Riddle Manor is surrounded by forest. The gnomes *hate* dark creatures, and will do anything to keep them out of their territories. I'm going to pop over to Little Hangleton and find some to talk to, if we can find it through the wards."

Harry looked at his friend soberly. "Let me come with you, Nev. In my animagus form (and Harry winced) I can watch your back. Finding it

will not be a problem – being inside Tom's head bypasses the fidelius.”

With a manly high-five, Neville and Harry apparated out of the trunk.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Neville and Harry popped in at the border of Riddle Manor, crouching down low despite being hidden under Harry's old invisibility cloak. Once they felt assured they hadn't been seen, Neville transformed into his animagus wolf form and stealthily crept around the perimeter of the grounds. Harry took his robin form and flew to a high branch at the edge of the wood facing the manor. The place was heavily warded – Neville could sense it with both his wizard and wolf abilities, and he kept well clear, not wanting to trip any alarms.

Lying down in some long grass in back of an ancient oak tree, the yellow-eyed wolf sniffed the air. He could clearly smell the Lestranges, and had to force himself not to growl. The scent of dark creatures was stifling and pungent, and he wanted to roll in something to get the stench off of his fur. His sharp ears picked up the sound of a door softly shutting and he peaked around the trunk.

In the distance two Death Eaters were leaving the manor. Though from that distance he couldn't make out what they were saying, he could tell by the sound of their voice they were grumbling. Throwing their hoods up and putting masks in place, the pair walked to the edge of the wards and apparated with noisy cracks.

Confident that he hadn't been noticed, Neville stood up and walked into the woods, away from the graveyard and house. He started snuffling in the leaves until he found the scent he was looking for – gnome. Following the trail, he trotted quickly through the dense forest until he came upon an obvious (to his experienced eye) hole in the base of a hickory tree.

*“Hey – anybody home?”* He called in a low bark down the hole. He could hear a tiny door open and a scampering sound.

*“Whoa! How is it that a wolf, and a gnomish speaking wolf at that, comes calling?”* The tiny being stood in the hole, hands on his hips

looking him over. The gnome could have been a model for German Christmas cards or cute little collectables. Classic brown tunic and pants, bright red boots and tall pointed hat, his eyes crinkled with many lines and a full white beard framed his face.

*"My name is Neville Longbottom, heir of Helga Hufflepuff. I was wondering if you could tell me about the creatures at that house over there."* He gestured back toward Riddle Manor with his snout.

*"Why you be wantin' to know about them?"* The gnome answered abruptly. *"Are ye helpin' them?"*

Neville gave a low convincing growl. *"No – soon my companions and I will call them out and end their time. I'm just gathering information to make it easier."*

The gnome laughed. *"Spoken like a true heir of Hufflepuff. Aye – I recognize a heir when I see one. My name is Sapwood. My family and several others have been eyeing them, and not liking what we see. So is it true –the founders returned. Is the Chosen One here?"*

*"Yes, the Chosen One is here in the form of a robin – I'm living with him as we prepare. Yes, the founders are all back."* Neville liked the gnome, but then, he had never met a gnome he *hadn't* liked.

*"Let me get my family and friends and come back with you, Neville."* Sapwood turned around and scampered down his hole. A few minutes later he returned with his plump wife, twin children, and four other adult gnomes. Neville transformed back, and gathered an armful of leaves into the invisibility cloak, and a framework of branches.

*"Do you think you will be comfortable in here, Sapwood? I can pop us back that way."* Neville looked at the gnomes, and critically eyed his gnome carrier.

*"We'll be right as rain, laddie"* Sapwood winked at him and the gnomes all climbed in.

It was at that moment that a ruckus erupted in the wood. Squeaking with fury, Harry's tiny robin form flew through the branches and

started attacking something in the grass. Neville whirled from the gnomes and drew his wand, trying to see what the small bird was diving at with such fury. Then he saw it – Nagini!

Neville received a hurried telepathic request from Harry to pop back to the safety of the trunk with the gnomes, but he just laughed. Leave his best friend in danger?

Harry the Bird Wonder glared with rage at the snake. How dare Nagini try to sneak up on his friend? He found himself boiling with anger – get away from my friend! Keep away NOW! Instinctively the bird aimed for the snake's eyes again and again, trying to pierce them with his small sharp beak, cut the reptile's smooth head, or drive her away at any cost. It never crossed Harry's mind to change back to a wizard – he was all consumed with his animagus form's fury.

Nagini hissed and struck repeatedly at the miniscule annoying little bird. At first it was merely an irritation – this was after all, just a robin. But the runt just would not quit! Didn't the bird realize how large and how poisonous she was? However, if Nagini had been a Quidditch player, she would not be a seeker. She was more of a beater type, and she could not land a strike on the small, flitting form once.

Harry, on the other hand, was a seeker. A very good seeker – even in bird form. First one eye, and then the other, and just like Fawkes and the basilisk, Nagini was blinded. Hissing, thrashing, and striking out without the help of sight, Neville stepped in and sliced the snake in two with a brutal slashing hex. Riddle's familiar was no more.

Harry landed on the ground and reverted to his human form, clutching his head in pain.

"What's wrong, Harry!" Neville ran up to him, forgetting the gnomes for the moment. "Did Nagini bite you?"

His friend shook his head painfully. Gritting his teeth, Harry said "Riddle is really upset. I usually don't feel it, but Nagini and he were really bonded. He knows the snake is dead, so let's get out of here!" Standing weakly, Harry cut the snake's head off with his sharp goblin knife, gathered it in the edge of his cloak and popped off with Neville and the gnomes for the trunk.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Neville and Harry popped in and gently set the cloak full of gnomes on the table. Harry took Nagini's head over to the potions bench for removing the venom sacs later, while Neville gently opened the cloak. Fairies flew over from around the room, greeting the gnomes, who listened intently to what they were saying. Harry sauntered back over to see gnomes and fairies all over the table, chatting away with each other. "Winky, can you stir up some gnome-appropriate snacks?" he asked.

Winky walked over and smiled at the gnomes. Harry gave her a quick hug and sat down to talk, while she and Dobby brought over upside down tea cups. Neville and Harry transfigured them into comfortable gnome seats and tables.

Sapwood introduced his family and friends, who all eyed Harry over with a friendly but critical eye. "*So this be the Chosen One*" he mused.

"Pardon?" Harry asked. He didn't learn gnomish in Hogwarts past – he had spent that time learning about the centaurs.

"Sorry, Sir." The gnome broke into English. "I was just commenting with my fellows that you were the Chosen One." The gnome smiled at him.

Harry blushed. "Yep – that be me" he agreed. "We were wondering if you could fill us in on what kind of nasties Riddle is palling around with."

The gnomes all looked at each other, enjoying the repast Winky brought over for them – strawberries and butterbeer. "Typically we gnomes steer clear of the big 'uns. Wizards are usually too uppity to pay us any mind. We found years ago that making ourselves look like mindless garden pests gave us access to magical locations to hear all the good gossip, snatch a few strawberries in season, and be left mostly alone. But we agree the time is critical and Riddle must be stopped."

An old gnome spoke up. "Aye – we've been watching Riddle Manor. We couldn't set foot in it, with that blasted snake of his, but we have

been watching. Thanks for destroying that cursed creature! First of all, his closest mate, if that's what you can call his servants, is a fat little wizard with a silver hand that changes into a rat. He's not much of a threat. We've considered capturing him several times."

Harry and Neville looked at each other. "Wormtail" Harry stated with disgust.

"He betrayed Harry's parents to Riddle" Neville explained to the gnomes, seeing their puzzled expressions. "He's the reason they died when he was a baby, and his godfather spent 12 years in Azkaban."

"Ah" the gnome nodded. "The number of Death Eaters has dropped considerably in the past two seasons. The dark wizards are in a right fright over it – they use to just pop them out of jail, and now they can't find them."

Sapwood's wife, Greenleaf, spoke next. "As for demons, he hasn't had much luck. He was hoping for some very nasty humanoid type of demons from the underworld, but they wanted to trade the work for his soul. Riddle doesn't want to tamper with his perceived immortality."

"Aye" agreed Sapwood, "that is a bit 'o luck for ye. They would have been tough to beat. What he's got in his 'army' now," and Harry didn't miss the sarcasm in his voice, "is a lot 'o boggarts, hinky punks, vampires, werewolves, and basically bad magical creatures. He's gone and told his servants that he's got demons, but the closest thing to a demon in his following is the dementors."

"Hmmm" Harry pondered out loud. "The last I knew he had about 200 of them. But how do we destroy dementors for once and all? And how do I deal with boggarts on a battlefield?"

"Boggarts we can deal with – even on a grand scale." Sapwood smiled, rubbing his hands together in glee. "Please leave them to us."

They finished their meal and gave the gnomes the 'grand tour' of Godric's Suitcase. After a delightful afternoon, Neville returned them to their tree and parted.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry and Neville were woke up the next morning to Dobby calling them excitedly.

“Harry Potter Sir! Master Neville! The gnomes came and found me in the kitchens! They brought you a present, sir!”

Harry sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Winky came with tea for the both of them as they stumbled out of the room. “What’s up?” he mumbled groggily.

Dobby pointed to a cage on the kitchen table. “Sapwood said this was with his complements, sir.”

In the cage was a very fat, half bald rat with a silver paw. The rat was looking extremely nervous.

## Chapter 31

### Stomp Stomp

Luna was sitting in Hagrid's hut, enjoying a bowl of tea with him. Actually, it was a mug, but it was so large it might as well been a bowl. Hagrid, delighted with the company, was regaling her with stories of his childhood and creatures of the Forbidden Forest. In turn, she was telling him about fairy creatures and yesterday's meeting with Magorian. They were having a delightful time.

Actually, it was altogether a delightful day for Luna. She had dreamed up some marvelous pranks during the night, another baby was born to Elrind's tribe early that morning, and the gnomes had given them a new pet. Granted, the homely looking rat was really a Death Eater that had been the bane of Harry's life, but she had all kinds of creative ideas for making its life more 'interesting' when they had more time.

"Luna, next Care of Magical Creatures class, could you bring some o' yer fairy friends?" Hagrid stared intently at the fairies flying around her head.

"Sure thing, Hagrid" she agreed, drinking two-handed from the huge mug. "By the way, Harry is about ready to confront Riddle. Did you have any luck with the giants?"

Hagrid snorted. "No secret there. You-Know-Who, uh, I mean, Riddle got to 'em first. I've only got Garwp here, who's coming along jest great."

"Garwp?" Luna asked with curiosity. "Who's Garwp?"

"Harry never told yer about me brother? Step brother, actually. I brung him here last summer – got him hiding in the forest." Hagrid looked amazed at the thought that not everyone was as careless with secrets as he was. "Come on, I'll introduce yer."

Luna followed Hagrid out his back door and into the forest. After a bit of a hike in a direction away from where the centaurs lived, she could

start to hear loud ‘twacks’ and ‘thumps’ and crunchy-breaky sounds. “Oh good” Hagrid smiled “Garwpy’s in a good mood today.”

They came into a clearing that wasn’t clear a year ago. Chained with a boat anchor type chain to a large bolder was a full-blood giant, who stood and shouted with deafening exuberance “Hagrid!” when they approached. He stopped, peered down at Luna dumbly and asked “Hermy?”

“Hermy?” Luna asked Hagrid.

“Oh – he thinks you are Hermione” Hagrid grinned. “He’s got a thing for her, he has.”

Luna calmly walked up to Garwp. Hagrid stammered nervously a bit, but decided to let her do what she felt was best. “Hi Garwp. I’m Luna.” She pointed to herself as she said it.

“Looona?” Garwp repeated, frowning. “No Hermy?” He sat back down and cocked his head, studying her.

“Luna” the pale witch nodded. Garwp started to shred a sapling and look agitated, but she swiftly drew her wand and created a light show of colored puffs of smoke and sparkles for Garwp. He drooled and clapped and cooed like a toddler. Like a very, very big toddler. While playing with him, she discreetly glowed some fairy spells of love and peacefulness, which settled the giant down totally.

“Grawp like Looona!” he burbled at her, while she calmly walked up to him and sat on his very large knee.

“Luna like Grawp” she smiled.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Lord Voldemort sat in his favorite chair – a curiously stiff and formal seat on a slightly raised dais, throne-like yet austere. As the room was empty of fawning servants and Death Eaters, and he allowed himself the luxury of groaning out loud.

Holding his head with his pale reptilian hands, he shuddered with grief and, if he allowed himself to name it, fear. Nagini. Nagini his beloved familiar was dead. Wormtail had not returned with her body yet, but would any minute. Nagini, always faithful, always knowing what to say to sooth her master's nerves. Nagini wasn't an incompetent boot licker like the rest of his followers. She was almost an equal. Now she was gone.

It must have been Potter, Voldemort pondered. No one else had the arrogance or skill to breach his wards, find Riddle Manor in spite of the Fidelius charm, and the power to defeat his beloved pet. With a deep sigh he sat up in his seat and started to strengthen his Occlumency shields – an exercise he hadn't needed for decades. Somehow, he knew Potter was able to access *his* mind as easily as he use to access his. Now he couldn't even feel the brat.

After a meditative hour or so a groveling figure in black approached his throne, fear rolling off him in tangible waves. "Yes?" Riddle asked him with arrogant impatience, licking his thin bloodless lips to taste the terror in the air.

"M-m-my Lord" the man trembled, speaking with a voice behind the mask that reflected youth, "we have the body of your familiar." The young wizard laid a large parcel at the Dark Lord's feet – obviously the body of his beloved snake wrapped in a cloak.

Riddle's eyes narrowed – he refused to show grief or emotion in front of his followers. Especially the newer ones. With a stiff flick of his wand, he magically drew back the cloak to look at Nagini one last time. "WHERE IS NAGINI'S HEAD?" he screamed at the cowering youth.

"W-w-we found her just like that, my Lord" the man cried. "I brought her to you immediately. We could find no trace of who did it."

"Where is Wormtail?" Riddle hissed darkly, glaring around the room. Most likely the rat forced this newbie into bringing the bad news so he could avoid punishment. No matter – he would make it up to the fat little rodent later.

“W-w-we don’t know, my Lord” the man stuttered in fear. “He’s missing.”

“CRUCIO!” Riddle screamed at the top of his lungs, lashing out his anger through the spell. The young Death Eater, having just finished his second week in Voldemort’s service, died swiftly from the force of the spell. Reasons like this was why he didn’t offer Death Eaters a benefits package on hiring.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

The Lupins were eating lunch together at Grimmauld Place when Mr. & Mrs. Weasley popped in through the floo. “You are off work early” Remus observed.

The father of the Weasley clan looked a bit nervous. “Can we speak safely here?” he asked, glancing around the familiar kitchen. Remus and Tonks nodded, and he proceeded to charm the room for privacy like Harry had taught him. “What’s up?”

Molly and Arthur sat down and helped themselves to the food offered. Molly, never one to mince words, started right in. “How do you two feel about the order?”

Tonks laughed. “That’s a loaded question. Can you be a tad more specific?”

The red headed husband and wife looked at each other. With a deep breath, Arthur said “OK, I’ll go out on a limb. We have reason to suspect Albus has been tampering with our thoughts, and our children.” They watched Remus and Tonks nervously for reaction.

Remus sighed sadly. “You are right – he has” he answered simply. Molly’s face started to turn colors as she got ready to launch into an understandable tantrum. Remus quickly raised a hand “hold on, Molly. Let me fill you in. First of all, we don’t agree with what he is doing. I didn’t tell you because Albus is a master Occlumens – it’s hard to keep secrets from him. Second of all, he’s become so skillful at manipulating people, if you tell someone he’s messing with them, chances are they will not believe it. Third of all, Harry is safe and almost ready to defeat Riddle.”

Mrs. Weasley backed down instantly. "Go on" she said tersely.

"Let's visit Harry and the kids" Tonks suggested. "He can explain best, and he has all kinds of visual aids."

"You know where Harry is?" Mr. Weasley asked, not terribly surprised.

Remus smiled and Tonks called out "Dobby!" The house-elf popped into the room. "Dobby dear, could you pop all of us over to visit Harry?" she smiled sweetly at him, batting her eye lashes.

Dobby giggled. "Yes Mrs. Lupin – right now?" She shrugged and chirped "sure", so Dobby grabbed everyone's hands and popped away.

Harry, Hermione, Neville and Luna were enjoying a relaxed lunch themselves. Hermione had just returned from her visit with the merfolk and they were going through stacks of books borrowed from the Hogwart's library trying to form a plan against dementors.

When the Weasleys popped in, Molly took one look at Harry and Hermione and with a strangled cry, ran forward and grabbed them in a crushing embrace. Then he whacked them both up side their heads with her purse.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN FRIGHTENING ME LIKE THAT?" she screeched at them both, who were trying admirably not to grin. "YOU COULD HAVE LET ME KNOW WHERE YOU WERE AT LEAST!" Then she looked around at the room, with its endless track of clicking, whirring marbles and huge moving canvas of Dumbledore. "Um, where *are* we, anyways?"

Harry grinned and bowed. "Welcome to Godric's Suitcase. Please allow me to show you around."

One tour later, Mrs. Weasley was relieved to see the boys and girls had separate quarters, Harry hadn't eloped, everyone was very well fed by Winky, and the world hadn't fallen apart without her. Neville and Luna discreetly popped out for a visit to his Gran, and the rest sat down to talk.

Settling down on the super-sofa and chairs, and Mr. Weasley nervously cleared his throat. "OK, we are very happy to find you are all right. Now what can you tell us about Ron, Ginny, and Albus." Everyone's mood became subdued.

Harry gazed at the pair thoughtfully for a bit while everyone fidgeted nervously. Finally he stood up and retrieved his untainted penseive and placed it in the middle of the coffee table. Gesturing over to the spy painting, he quickly explained how they had been watching Dumbledore all year, and this wasn't going to be pleasant for them to see.

Harry grabbed the memories from his mind of Ron storming in demanding the use of his payola, and Ginny's talk with the headmaster, and placed them in the stone bowl. Molly and Arthur looked almost frightened as they gazed at the swirling silver mist, but Harry shrugged and told them "it is best to know the truth."

When the Weasleys were done with the memories, they sat back in their chairs, anger and shock written over their faces. Molly had tears dripping silently down her cheeks, as she murmured over and over "my babies, my poor babies. What has he done to you?" Arthur didn't say a word, but was shaking with barely contained rage.

Molly looked at Harry and Hermione, blowing her nose and sniffing. "I always thought you would marry Ginny, Harry, and you Hermione would be with Ron. Now I find out any interest they had was only in their wallets. I'm so sorry – I thought I raised better children than that."

Hermione patted her arm. "Mrs. Weasley, you did raise great kids. Fred and George are over here all the time helping us. Bill and Charlie are wonderful, and Percy is back from a difficult time. Perhaps if Professor Dumbledore hadn't had pushed Ron and Ginny into spying on Harry, there wouldn't be so much unconscious hostility, and those relationships might have occurred. We will never know. As it stands, we are willing to bet that Dumbledore has given them charmed items, or charmed items in your home to keep them subservient to him, and obeying him no matter what they would honestly think or feel."

“What can we do?” Arthur finally spoke. Remus handed him a glass of Firewhiskey that they kept on hand in the trunk for cases such as this.

“We can ask Hogwarts to keep Dumbledore busy for the afternoon, and come to the burrow with you. The four of us will find any charmed items and remove the hexes, and we can remove any tampering with their minds. Dumbledore has been laying it on thick lately, and it won’t be hard to do. Very clumsy and heavy handed.” Harry stared at the table top. He really hated to go near Ron or Ginny, but he wanted to help the family in any way he could.

Mrs. Weasley nodded numbly, as her husband downed his drink. Hermione sized the red-heads up. “I think you should hear the rest of what the Headmaster has been doing, first. It will give you time to recover some from the shock.”

Harry, Hermione, Remus and Tonks swiftly delivered the fast version of Harry’s past year – finding his parent’s will, the tainted penseive, forbidding Harry to go to Sirius’ will reading, and all they learned through the spy canvas. They shared with them the training they had done with various beings and the founders and that the final battle was to take place soon. The discussion was peppered with many visits through the penseive.

When they had exhausted the topic, Harry and Hermione gently removed all blocks and false memories implanted in the Weasley parents, who took a rest, adjusting to the proper memories now in their heads. Arthur shook his head sadly and observed “I guess it’s too late in the day to go to the burrow now.”

“Er, I charmed the room for time slowing – we’ve only been here about 2 minutes actually” Harry gently smiled. His heart had been broken last summer by Ron, Ginny and Dumbledore, and now the people who loved him like their own were going through worse. He knew he had to help.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

The walk though the burrow, with a sullen and uncooperative Ron and Ginny in tow, revealed what Harry and Hermione expected. The

mantle in the kitchen, jewelry, shoes, robes, toys, tea pots – it took the two of them hours to find it all and safely contain them.

Molly shuddered. “Why not just remove the charms, Harry dear? I’ve no doubt you are powerful enough”.

“Thanks Mrs. Weasley. We both could, but it might trigger an alarm to Dumbledore. By containing them this way, he thinks they are still in place and working.” Harry was working inch by inch on the door jamb to envelope a potent loyalty charm.

Ginny was sitting in a seat by a sunny window, tears slowly dripping down her face. Ron was standing next to her, patting her arm and looking much less antagonistic than he was a couple hours ago. Tonks was keeping a covert eye on them to make sure they didn’t try to contact the headmaster. The former best friend turned to Harry and asked “what now? What are you going to do to us?” The red-headed boy’s hands were clenched in anger and fear.

Harry looked at him in shock. “Do to you?” he asked in amazement. “With your permission I’ll remove all of the tampering Dumbledore has done to your heads, and I’ll ask you not to talk to him. That’s all I want to *do* to you.” He turned away from Ron, visibly hurt.

Ginny sniffed. “Don’t be a bigger prat than we’ve been, Ron. Can’t you see – can’t you feel the difference already? Dumbledore’s been screwing with our heads ever since we’ve started Hogwarts. He’s paid us to spy on our mate, and hexed us to never even question it. Harry – you can poke around my mind all you want – I owe it to you and Hermione.” She jumped out of her chair and stood in front of him bravely.

The Boy-Who-Lived gave her a quick brotherly hug. “Ginny, thank you for trusting me. But you really want Hermione to do it. I don’t think we need to be sharing thoughts or memories – it’s not proper.” She nodded in relieved agreement, and Hermione took her hand and sat down next to her on a sofa.

Hermione handed Ginny a handkerchief to compose herself, and then looked deep into her brown eyes. Dumbledore had never attempted to teach the young red-head any occlumency, or really had anything

to do with her, except to use her as a snoop on Harry and potentially a distraction for him. Hermione was horrified to find implanted suggestions which had caused the poor girl to have hormonal surges beyond normal teenage urges, and much of her 'nasty' personality was truly caused by the headmaster's manipulations. Gently, lovingly, Hermione pointed out to Ginny everywhere Dumbledore had caused her craziness, removed the tampering, and soothed her guilt and battered ego before backing out of her mind.

They broke apart, and Hermione sent a quick message to Harry, letting him know the general nature of what she found without gossiping. Ginny flung herself into her mother's arms, weeping bitterly for her lost youth and Dumbledore's rape of her self-control.

"What did you do to her, 'Mione?" Ron shouted with agitation, but Ginny flung a hand out to him.

"Nothing Ron – she just took all of that dirtbag's influence out of my brain. Let Harry do you – you won't believe what he's done to us." And she started sobbing all over again, her mother crying with her.

"OK, Harry. Do me." Ron gulped and waited.

"Don't fret, mate" Harry said softly. "It doesn't hurt, and I'm not poking around – ask Ginny. I'm just looking for what the Goblins call 'scent'. Dumbledore's scent. Then I show it to you and remove it. It's a two-person thing." Ron lifted his gaze from his lap and with Gryffindor bravery, looked Harry in the eyes.

Harry went in gently and swiftly. Dumbledore had spent more years and more effort on Ron than Ginny, and there was a lot of tampering to deal with. Together the two young wizards explored, prodded, and exhumed the poison of the headmaster. Harry was grateful to learn that Ron and his meeting at Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  that first September was just chance – the headmaster hadn't got to Ron until later that year. So once all the tampering was removed, they decided to sit down in Ron's head and play a game of wizard's chess as eleven year olds again – sort of starting their friendship over again. Molly and Arthur were curious to see giggling and smiling going on between the boys – far different from the guilt and loss that Ginny experienced. Ginny understood.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry and Hermione got home to Godric's Suitcase late that night. Luna and Neville were waiting up to get a full report. Winky and Dobby made a fancy Japanese dinner of sushi and sashimi for everyone, which was fine with Hermione as soon as she learned that no sentient fish were used. The elves never ceased to amaze with their culinary skills.

"So what's up for tomorrow?" Neville asked after hearing the good news that the Weasleys were all on their side now.

"I think I need to visit Madame Bones tomorrow" Harry said around a mouth full of rice, wiping a wasabi-inspired tear from his eye. We have three weeks left until school starts. I want to take Riddle down before that. I think Hogwarts grounds is probably the best location – heavily warded from the muggles so they don't know what's going on, and I don't want students here. I checked with Lady Hogwarts and she's fine with it. I think next Monday would be a lovely date – what do you guys think?"

Hermione grabbed her planner and the four of them agreed – the hopefully final battle against Riddle would be next Monday. Now the trick would be to let the order, the aurors, and all beings who wanted to fight for the light to know and be there without Death Eaters, Tom, or Fudge finding out.

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## Chapter 32

### War Plans

Griphook eyed his son shrewdly, taking in his stiff back and recognizing it as a sign of something he didn't want to talk about. The goblin sipped his coffee slowly, savoring the strong caffeine for a moment before speaking.

"So, my son, what is troubling you?" He noted with pride the self-control Harry showed in not showing his surprise when he spoke.

Harry looked down in his untouched cup of tea and smiled. "You know me too well, father" he shrugged. "The final battle is Monday, and I'm struggling with what I have to do."

Griphook moved his chair closer to Harry's. They were sitting in his office in Gringotts sharing a quiet lunch. "And what do you have to do, my son?" he asked softly.

"Kill, father. I hate Riddle – I hate everything he's done to me, my friends, my family, my world. But can I murder him? Won't that make me the same?" Harry was shredding a scrap of parchment into confetti while he confessed what had been eating away at him for so long. "If I kill once, will it not make it easier a second time? And a third? Will I become the next dark lord?"

The goblin studied his adopted son with pride. Goblins are born warriors – this sort of dilemma rarely came up in their culture. But Griphook had worked with wizards for many decades, and understood their sensitivities. He put a firm hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Son – what is the difference between a soldier and a murderer?" Griphook looked him calmly in the eye with no judgment or disappointment.

"Errr" Harry stammered, running his fingers through his hair. "I, I'm not sure."

"So every soldier or auror or muggle policeman should be put on trail for murder? Every person who defends to the death their family or

property from a violent robber should be jailed for life?" Griphook smiled at the light dawning in Harry's eyes.

"No – they do what they have to, to defend the people they love or work for. A murderer is killing for personal profit." The young man visibly relaxed.

"Quite so" the goblin sipped his coffee. "Riddle kills for pleasure, for power, for personal gain. He has no remorse, no pity. Aurors and warriors spend much time in counseling to move past the guilt and agony they feel when they must take a life. The light side kills only when necessary – not for sport. Goblins are warriors, but we are not barbarians. You will not be put on trial for putting down a rabid dog like Riddle. The world will rejoice and be a safer place. The Powers-That-Be will not think less of you, my hero son, and the counselors will be ready if you need them."

"It's so hard, father" Harry spoke barely above a whisper. He set the tea down, giving up any pretense of eating or drinking. "I just can't see myself killing anyone. I have fantasized about torturing him and Bella. But I just can not see myself willingly cast the AK at them or knowingly thrust a blade through them."

"That is good, Furybolt" Griphook patted his son's hand. "Righteous anger will serve you. Fear of becoming dark will drive you away from that journey. My advise – kill Riddle for you, for me, for everyone and everything you hold dear. Then do not even consider joining the Aurors. Hopefully you will never need to kill again."

Harry smiled. "How did I get so lucky to get such a wise father?"

"How did I get so lucky to find such a good son?" Griphook returned the smile with sharp-toothed pride.

**0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Harry was standing in front of his fireplace in Godric's Suitcase, his arms crossed, back stiff and legs planted firmly. The Chosen One was the very embodiment of determination. The paintings of Godric's Hollow and Potter Manor hung centered above the mantle, Godric's

Hollow on top. His Mum and Dad's portraits were grouped to the left of the two houses, Sirius and Joan to the right.

Currently his parents, godfather and aunt were clustered together in Lily's frame, and all of them were wearing expressions of frustration, anger, and fear as they gawked at Harry. Only Aunt Joan was looking calm and thoughtful.

"You mean to tell me" Sirius was sputtering "you don't know exactly how to kill Riddle, but you have just invited him over for a nice little war? This isn't a Quidditch match, Cub!"

James broke in, even more heated than Padfoot. "At least train some more, son! Train until you have a sure-fire way to destroy him! This is insanity!"

Tears were dripping down his mother's face. "Please, please Harry. Reconsider. Just having 'a good feeling' is not the way to confront him!"

His posture unrelenting, Harry took a deep breath. "I've trained all I can, guys. I understand what you are saying, but *now* is the time. I can't explain it – I just know we are ready. I'm not jumping into this like a hot-headed Gryffindor. I've thought it out, and I know I can do it. I just don't know how yet, but I will."

Aunt Joan finally spoke up from the rear of the quartet. She put a gentle hand on Sirius' shoulder and cleared her throat. "I for one agree with you, Harry." She looked Lily and James in the eyes as she continued. "I know it sounds crazy, but you three know Harry too closely and love him too dearly. As an outsider who has recently come into his inner group of friends, I think I can be more objective. The Founders have given the four of them their very own training, weapons, and blessing. He has rallied the centaurs and goblins for the first time in countless years. He has linked up with gnomes, fairies, giants, and elves. I have never met a more powerful wizard. I have never seen the signs like they are now." She turned her pretty face toward Harry again. "I agree the time is right."

"Do you have a bad feeling about this, honestly, Mum?" Harry searched his mother's face with a penetrating gaze. His mother did

have some seer abilities, and any glimpse of the future, no matter how vague, could be priceless.

Lily started to open her mouth, eyes blazing, but snapped it shut. With a defeated sigh, she visibly deflated. “No, Harry, I don’t. It is too easy as a mother to say ‘it doesn’t feel right’ to try and keep you safe. But you will never be safe as long as that monster is alive, will you? If I’m perfectly honest with myself, I have to agree with you. It just doesn’t make it easy.”

“I’m sorry to put you through this” Harry answered softly. “But I know I can do it.”

**0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Madame Bones, the Minister of Magic, eyed the polite house-self standing at attention across from her desk.

“So Harry Potter is fine, and not in any danger or trouble?” she asked skeptically.

Winky nodded politely. “Yes, Madame Minister. He is just in hiding from Headmaster Dumbledore and Tom Riddle. He has become a powerful wizard.” She said this last bit swelling with pride.

The fact Dumbledore had been listed as a threat before Voldemort did not escape the Minister’s notice. “Why would Harry need to hide from his headmaster?” she asked with a touch of bewilderment.

“It is not Winky’s place to discuss her master’s business” the elf answered politely and professionally. “He needs to meet with you as soon as possible to discuss important matters in this war.”

Amelia Bones re-read the short letter the elf had delivered. It was courteous and to the point. Lord Harry Furybolt James Potter-Black needed to speak with her concerning Tom Riddle. She cleared her throat before speaking to the elf. “Could he be here at 10:30? I know that’s not much notice, but I imagine he’s prepared.”

Winky nodded. “Do you wish him to come through security, or may he pop directly in here?”

“Oh, my office is warded pretty heavily” the witch chuckled. “I’d like to see him manage that.”

“Harry Potter will be right with you, ma’m” Winky concluded and popped away.

Amelia Bones had no sooner set Harry’s letter down on her desk when she heard the faintest of ‘pops’ and looked up to see The-Boy-Who-Lived standing in front of her desk, a scarlet phoenix perched on his shoulder. He smiled politely at her and offered a handshake. She took his hand, forcing herself not to gape like a fish.

“Madame Bones,” Harry spoke seriously, “Thank you for speaking with me.” She gestured Harry to a seat.

“Tea?” she asked.

“Sure” Harry replied, and wandlessly conjured tea and biscuits for the two of them. Noting her surprise, he shrugged and said “it saves time.” He took a breath and looked the Minister over. “Madame Bones, may I share thoughts with you? I normally wouldn’t ask such a personal thing, and I promise not to go deep or personal, but for the safety of the magical world I need to see where you stand and you need to see where I am coming from.”

She sat back in her chair, sipping her tea and contemplating the young wizard before her. Dumbledore was less than flattering about Harry – calling him weak, rebellious and a wild card. The man sitting in front of her was polite, respectful, and with out question, powerful. Could she allow someone that powerful inside her mind? She knew Dumbledore had rummaged around her head, or so he had thought. The headmaster’s occlumency was rather obvious and she easily blocked him from where he shouldn’t be. How much stronger could a lad of seventeen be? And would it truly be a reciprocal experience?

“OK, Harry. I’m a bit nervous, but if I’m not happy, I think I have the skills to back out. And I do have aurors outside my door, you are aware.”

“Minister, you may back out at any time – and I can do the same.” Harry leaned forward and took her hands, looking into her eyes.

Harry was pleased to see an organized and loyal mind in the Minister. She loved the light, despised Riddle and the dark, and ached for the pain brought to the magical world. There was deep questioning of Dumbledore, treatment of the magical sentient creatures, and the ministry's handling of underage wizards. She was firm, strict, and fair.

Amelia Bones was astounded by the experience. She had full control, and was pleased to see Harry merely wanted to confirm her loyalties. At no time was she violated or even uncomfortable. She was able to meet the famous Harry Potter like never before – glimpses of an abused child, and a terribly mistreated student. He gave her enough reasons to demand Dumbledore's resignation on the spot, once she confirmed the headmaster had ignored the Potter will, obliterated those scores of people, stolen from Harry, and subjected the students to all that danger.

Harry shared with her the year with the centaurs, Goblins, house-elves, and the Founders (in short flashes because of time). She could feel the magic tingling in his very being – barely contained at times, glorious and powerful. She felt positive Riddle did not stand a chance.

He let go of her hands and the connection was gently broken. "Harry, if you ever chose to go into politics, you know you would have my job" she said with a slight touch of worry. It did take a strong ego and type A personality to go into politics, and she felt a tad insecure with his power revealed.

"Minister" Harry said in his typical soft and humble manner, "I'm not a politician. I hate my popularity and fame. I believe our leader needs to be someone with maturity and experience. Although I've received virtually years of training in the past single year, I lack experience, and maturity doesn't happen over night. As I showed you, the Founders have tasked my friends and me to take the leadership of Hogwarts, and return it to a serious institution of learning once again. Dumbledore has let the school slide into meritocracy and worse over the past decades. But first Riddle has got to be dealt with."

"What do you need from the Ministry, Harry?" Madame Bones threw her full confidence in back of the young man.

“A week from today I plan to duel Riddle. I’m going to send him the challenge when you feel is the best time. I’m not sure if we want to notify him right before, with no notice, or today so the ministry can gather as many willing fighters as possible.” Harry spoke so casually, Amelia wasn’t sure she heard him correctly.

She gave him a hard look. “All right, Harry. First of all, what makes you think he will come when you challenge him?”

The Chosen One smiled sadly. “I’ve been keeping tabs on him all year through the link forged by my scar” he pointed to his forehead with a casual gesture. “He can’t sense me any more – he thinks I’m overseas actually. But I can spy on him any time I wish – I’m the source of information that has led the aurors to all the attacks this past year. And no, he doesn’t control me, despite what Dumbledore says. I can easily work him into a rage to where he *has* to come.”

Amelia shook her head. “You have been truly abused, Lord Potter, by both your family and Professor Dumbledore. I know Riddle isn’t in your mind – your mind and your whole aura is clean. Would you like me to have Dumbledore arrested? ”

Oh how tempting! “No, not right now” Harry laughed. “I do fantasize way too much about Albus in jail, but seriously, he *is* a hero. I refuse to turn my back on the great good he has done the wizards over the decades. I want him to back down and leave me to do my job against Riddle, and then to retire without a fight afterwards. If he does that, he can remain a hero in the public’s eye and preserve his reputation. I just want to be left alone.”

Amelia raised an eyebrow. “That’s very mature, Lord Potter. More than he deserves. But you are correct – the greater part of the wizards would never believe half of what he’s done.” She changed directions with the conversation. “Now, about the battle. Where and why so soon?”

Harry gazed out her window with a far away expression. “We feel Hogwarts would be best – it’s heavily warded against the outside world, and we don’t want the muggles drawn in. We chose next week because we just finished our training with the Founders, and formed alliances with the centaurs, Goblins, Merpeople and more. We want

to have this done before the school year starts and children are around.”

The Minister had her chin resting on her fists, contemplating what Harry said. “Let me call in Kingsley and see how many aurors we have on hand.”

Kingsley Shacklebolt, head of the aurors, strode into the room and gave a start when he saw Harry. “You know Dumbledore is beside himself looking for you?” he said curtly.

“Yes sir, I’m well aware of it” Harry replied with a glint of amusement.

The auror noticed the calmness and power that radiated off the youth. “Well, I’m not telling him anything” he concluded.

Madame Bones and Harry filled the leader of the aurors in with what Harry was proposing. Although caught off guard, he was immediately taken with the plan. “How many fighters do we need? What is the size of Riddle’s forces?” he asked with penetrating seriousness.

“He’s down to about 3 dozen” Harry replied, “and only a few are seasoned. Most are new green recruits. We just got Wormtail the other day – I can hand him over if you wish. I really don’t think the Death Munchers are going to be a problem. Actually – they are in serious trouble – when I destroy Riddle, they die because of the dark mark. It’s a bond that is tied to life forces. So if you know any Death Eaters that want out, I must know before the battle so I can remove the mark.”

“You can do that?” Kingsley asked, his eyebrows arched in surprise. “What about Snape?”

“Taken care of” Harry said. “Ask him to see next time you see him, but the headmaster doesn’t know.”

“What are Riddle’s forces made of?” Amelia broke in.

“Rumor are flying that he’s recruited demons, but that’s not true. They wanted his soul in payment, and he’s not willing to put it on the line, so they are now ignoring him.” Harry started ticking off on his fingers

“He has gotten some dark creatures from other dimensions to side with him, but the gnomes and fairies assure me they are small things no more threatening than a kappa or hinky punks. Sadly, he does have the giants, except for Hagrid and his step-brother Garwp, werewolves except for Remus Lupin, and vampires. He’s got the boggarts, but the gnomes are going to handle those for us. The biggest problem is the dementors – he controls about 200 of them.”

“Gnomes?” the minister asked. “How can garden gnomes be of any help?”

Harry simply smiled and said “It’s a long story – they will have to share it with you themselves if they wish.”

“You make it sound like it’s not going to be much of a battle” Kingsley said darkly, with disbelief.

Harry shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong – Riddle is very powerful. Perhaps more powerful than I. But destiny has foretold I can do this, and I know many forms of magic he’s overlooked in his arrogance. Dark magic can only do so much.” Harry sat back comfortably in his chair. “Tom is also quite insane at this point. Eavesdropping in his brain is not pleasant. He is paranoid and doesn’t trust anyone. He thinks his bullying and threats keep his Death Munchers loyal – it doesn’t. They stay because they fear him, not because they believe in him. Ever since the aurors started ‘canning’ the Eaters, his numbers of wizards and witches has dwindled. We need an army of light to keep the battle away from Riddle and I, and act as a clean up crew on the rest of the dark creatures when Riddle is dead.”

“*When* Riddle is dead... what if you fail?” Shacklebolt asked grimly. Amelia stared at Harry intently.

Harry gave a heartfelt sigh. “Then it will be up to the light army to band together and attack him at once. He will not be able to kill me easily or quickly – I promise he will be considerably weakened if I fail.”

“I say contact him now” Kingsley stated, “because once we try to recruit wizards or tell the aurors, word will leak to him anyway. I think we should put posters up, contact the Prophet – let the whole world

know and get as many to fight on our side as possible.” Bones nodded in approval.

“I’ll tell him now” Harry said simply. He closed his eyes and followed the blood-red thread to Riddle’s diseased mind. *“Tom, Tommy boy? I know you can hear me clearly”* Harry taunted. He was pleased to see Riddle throwing his face back and forth, looking for the source of Harry’s voice. *“Really, Tom – after years of torturing me like this, you think you would recognize a voice in your mind. Do you recognize this?”* Harry hit him with a crucio from within. He backed out for a minute or two while the dark wizard screamed and thrashed in agony – the same agony he had put Harry through countless times. Harry went back in and cancelled the dark spell of pain.

*“Now listen, meat head, and listen carefully”* Harry continued to taunt the dark wizard. *“Next Monday morning, 10:30, meet me on Hogwarts’ ground near the Quiddich field. We are going to end this once and for all. The wards will be lifted long enough for you to enter.”* Before Riddle had a chance to reply or even stammer an acknowledgement, Harry blasted him with jolt of magical fury so intense, Voldemort had a sharp slash of power slice clear through his skull from the inside out, leaving him with a dripping, bleeding scar on his forehead to match Harry’s own. Riddle knew he was in serious trouble.

Kingsley and Amelia watched the calm expression on Harry’s face, the only hint that something was going on was a sudden golden glow that turned hot-white, and faded away, enveloping his person. He opened his eyes and grinned. “He knows. I even left him with a present.”

They didn’t ask.

## Chapter 33

### Before the Battle

Winky and Dobby were serving dinner in Godric's Suitcase. All of Harry's favorite foods were making an appearance ever since he chose the date for the final battle. "Really guys – we will be fine" Harry grinned at them. Poor Winky was on the verge of tears all the time.

Neville looked at his best friends. "So Harry," he began, "how *are* you going to take out Riddle?"

"I'm not really sure" Harry shrugged. "Play it by ear, I suppose. I know I can do it. These swords and shield are amazingly powerful, I can enter his brain at will, and found out this morning I can crucio from the inside. I'm not proud of using a dark spell, but I don't think anyone will argue when it's used against Tom."

"You crucio'd Riddle?" Hermione asked with admiration and fear. Visions of her fiancé in a striped suit with a boyfriend named Bubba came to mind, unbidden. "Why didn't you just kill him right there and then?"

"Yep" he laughed. "Really made his morning, too. I also gave him a scar to match mine. Gave him just a taste of what he's put me through for the past six years. As for killing him, we don't want to kill his body until we can take care of his soul too." Harry shook his head. "Anyway – with all his dark rituals he's performed over the years and being resurrected with my blood, he can't be killed with dark magic or just my magic alone. He's sort of immune to it, if that makes sense. I was able to hurt him because I caught him unaware, but even now he's blocking that ability. I can still hear him and talk with him through our link, but injuring him isn't possible now. Believe me – I tried."

"I don't think you will have much of a problem with Riddle" Luna pondered. "The fairies will tackle the dementors, and fairy magic can contain his soul. The biggest challenge will be the clean-up. He's got quite a few nasties working for him, and we don't want to kill anything or anyone that could be reformed."

Neville nodded in agreement, but Hermione observed “well, there comes a point where you have to pick a side and stick with it, and be willing to deal with the consequences.”

Fawkes trilled a song which put a smile back onto Winkys’ worried face. “Thank you, Mr. Fawkes” she whispered.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Dumbledore was pacing again. His life was a deep well of anger from sun up to sun down. Fawkes was always able to calm him, and Fawkes was gone who knows where. The aurors barely gave him the time of day, the other teachers were avoiding him, the Order was questioning his authority more and more, and frankly, he had simply lost control somewhere, at some time. He couldn’t even find Godric’s sword anymore.

The Daily Prophet was open on his desk. Harry Potter publicly challenged Voldemort to battle, and at his school grounds! Without even asking him!

He sat heavily in his chair, and gazed dumbly at the stacks of parchment. He still received too many owls on a daily basis with complaints about how he handled Voldemort’s identity, or the safety of the students. Many students withdrew this summer.

Albus Dumbledore heard a faint noise and looked up. There, standing before him, was Harry Potter, Fawkes sitting on his shoulder, flanked by Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Lovegood. The expressions on their faces were less than friendly. They looked menacing, powerful, and very much in control of themselves. All were dressed in dragonhide armor, and were wearing the swords of the founders, Luna carrying a shield.

“What, where, hey – what are you doing with my sword and bird!” the ancient sputtered with fury.

Harry eyed him coldly. “The sword belongs to Godric Gryffindor. He chose for me to carry it for a time. The Founders have trained us and given us their weapons to carry into battle. As for Fawkes, he chose to come to me.”

"How dare you" the headmaster hissed. "How dare you barge into my office, steal my belongings, and bring danger to my school."

"And how dare you" Harry answered with tightly contained hostility, "go against my parent's will, steal my money, pay off my friends to spy on me, and keep me weak and imprisoned all these years?"

Dumbledore sat back abruptly and tried a new tactic. "Can't we sit and discuss this like adults?" he asked sweetly, conjuring four chairs and tea. He pushed the bowl of tainted lemon drops over to them, and attempted to enter their minds, starting with Neville.

"*Nice try, Sir*" Neville's voice rang clearly in his head. He turned to Luna. "*I wouldn't bother, headmaster*" she told him. Hermione next, "*Oh come on, sir. If it failed with them, what makes you think it will work with me?*" Lastly, he looked weakly at Harry. "*If you want to know what I'm thinking, either ask me or look again at that penseive you gave me*" he was told sharply before being forcefully ejected from Harry's mind.

"Fine" the headmaster glared at the four, who remained standing. "What do you want?"

"Once I defeat Riddle, I want you to step down and hand the headmaster position to Professor McGonagall" Harry told him in a no-nonsense tone. "The Founders have removed you, and Hogwarts no longer responds to you. Professor McGonagall will hold the position until we have graduated."

"Do you really think you *children*" he spat the word with venom, "can handle my job? This is MY position, and I'm not leaving for any brats with their egos pumped with pride to take over. I really think your fame has gone to your head, *boy*."

"The Founders have named us their heirs and trained us themselves, professor" Harry replied calmly. "Pride and ego have nothing to do with it. We request you step down and retire to someplace quiet, or I will get the authorities involved. I have enough proof with my parents will, Gringott's records, and school records to have you put away, if you prefer."

Dumbledore flew into a rage. "I will NOT step down! This is MY office, MY school! Get out! GET OUT! And give me my bird and sword back!" He screamed, throwing books at them. "And you will NOT play soldier on my school property!"

Harry and his friends looked at him calmly and sadly. "The battle is on the Quiddich field, next Monday, like it or not."

The headmaster glared at him. "I'm not removing any wards, and neither are MY teachers!"

"I am" Harry replied. "Hogwarts answers to us now."

Dumbledore screamed with fury and reached for his wand. Harry smirked and with a flick of his finger, tore it out of the headmaster's grip and out the window. With a strangled cry the old man jumped up and leaned out to watch it fall. He turned and looked at Harry darkly. "At least give me Fawkes back" he spat.

Fawkes looked at Dumbledore sadly, and sent him a look of pity, love lost, and refusal. Then the magical bird turned his back on Albus, facing away.

"Remember" Harry said, "you can retire, or be arrested. Your choice."

The four apparated back to Godric's Suitcase, leaving the ancient mugwump speechless, slumped in his chair.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The day went downhill from there for the headmaster. Harry and his friends sat on the sofa, munching Winky's excellent popcorn and watching the 'telly'. Not soon after they left the office Filch came storming in, demanding to talk to Dumbledore.

***"Not now, Argus. I'm busy trying to stop this fiasco on Monday"***  
*Dumbledore growled at the old caretaker.*

***"You WILL talk to me!" Filch growled. "For years now you've patted my head and told me to 'clean like a good little squib'. I've let myself grow madder and madder, and take it out on the***

***students, and you encouraged it! Why? Did it amuse you? Did it amuse you to NOT TELL ME I WAS A WIZARD?"*** The caretaker sobbed the last word with a voice cracked with grief and anger.

***"Now Argus, calm yourself. Whoever gave you the impression you can do magic? You shouldn't get your hopes up like that..."*** Dumbledore started to wave his wand under the desk toward the old man.

"Whoops" Harry said "Clean up in aisle eight." He got ready to pop in and protect Filch.

"Wait Harry" Hermione broke in, "something is happening."

***"Wait right there, Headmaster."*** Tiny Professor Flitwick walked into the room. ***"I've been teaching him myself. You will NOT obliviate him or myself."***

"Whooooo hoo!" Neville yelled, throwing popcorn in the air like confetti.

***Flitwick glared at Albus. "I will be bringing this up to the board of directors –a shameful way to treat a wizard all these years. And don't bother with stopping Harry – all the teachers and I agree with him, and will be on the field with him Monday."***

***Flitwick reached up and took Filch gently by the elbow. "Come, Argus, let us leave."***

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Tom Riddle paced his own floors, not unlike Dumbledore miles away. But instead of seething with anger and wounded pride, the dark wizard was trembling with fear. He spun on his heel and faced Bella, who was studying frantically at a table set near this throne. "Any ideas yet?" He hissed at her. "How do I completely block Potter? How can I sever this cursed connection?"

"I'm working on it, my Lord" she answered in her usual insipid tone of worship and idolization.

What could he do about Harry Potter? How had he gained so much power so quickly? He kept trying to break into Potter's head, but couldn't even sense him any more. It took a whole day for his new scar to stop bleeding, and he was scared. Terrified, if he was to be honest with himself.

Potter, for a year now, was able to trace him, track him, and now evidently kill him long distance. Where were all his Death Eaters? Lucius, Severus, Wormtail, Rodolphus, Nott... all the good ones were gone, except for Bella. He eyed her with suspicion. Were they dead, or were they now working for Potter?

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, stood at the podium in front of the rather small crowd in the magically expanded parlor at Number 12 Grimmauld Place. There use to be a couple hundred good witches and wizards in the Order of the Phoenix. Now there was a scant 50 or so – the remainder disappearing as they got the impression that the Order was no more than an ego boost to Dumbledore, and not doing enough to stop Riddle.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts put on his best hero/protector smile and twinkles, and cleared his throat to address the loyal remainder. That was when he noticed a shimmering blue bubble appearing, surrounding him. "What is this?" he sputtered in anger.

Remus Lupin stood up and answered him calmly. "We want to hear what you have to say, Albus, but none of us wish to be obliviated or have our minds tampered with."

Dumbledore turned red with rage. How DARE they? He looked at the faces in the crowd – Tonks, Kingsley, multiple Weasleys, Jones, and McGonagall... all of them looking unfriendly and hostile. They all knew – all of them. They knew he had been prompting their choices, choosing their loyalties, taking their memories when it suited him. The ancient rubbed his arm in frustration.

“We will NOT be joining in on that doomed battle on Monday” he shouted at the Order. “It’s a fool’s errand – if we go, we die, and there will be no one left to fight for the light! Remember I founded this group. Remember I am your leader.”

Remus stood again, and seemed to be speaking for the crowd. “I feel Harry will succeed. We have kept him in the dark – actually imprisoned - all these years. I wonder whose side you are really on, Albus.” The crowd murmured in agreement, shooting hostile looks at the headmaster.

“Lupin – whose side are YOU on? Who gave you a job when nobody else would? Who saved this world from Grindelwald? You OWE me your allegiance!” Dumbledore was practically frothing at the mouth. “I DEMAND you leave this house – you are out of the Order!”

Remus laughed sadly. “Albus, this is my house, or have you forgotten? He walked to the front and spoke in a confident voice “I will be at Hogwarts, fighting by Harry on Monday. Who will join me?”

The crowd stood as one, cheering and pumping their fists. Dumbledore stared at the crowd – his Order – spun on his heel and left the house for the last time.

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## Chapter 34

### The Final Battle

Monday, August the 14th, dawned clear and warm. The faintest of breezes occasionally stirred the air, but there was a stillness that spoke volumes of how solemn the day was. Harry dressed slowly and deliberately, checking his wands, holsters, and armor countless times, and doing the same for his friends.

He has spent the week constantly listening in on Riddle, who was terrified to the point of running away. Every time the 'most powerful wizard in the world', as he referred to himself, started to consider not showing up, Harry would egg him on with subtle mind manipulation, or out right breaking in and taunting him. Riddle was a sleep deprived, bed wetting, barely walking pile of goo. But Riddle would be there.

Harry sent Winky to Hogsmeade to fetch Griphook, who was waiting with the Goblin army for the wards to let them in. She returned with Harry's adoptive father and King Flailhide. They shared an early morning breakfast in Godric's Suitcase with the twins, Tonks and Remus, Hermione's folks (whom Dobby popped over from South America), Luna's father and Neville's Gran. The taste in the air was serious but optimistic. The Quidditch stands and goals had been removed, and Winky had fetched the spy canvas from the headmaster's office and placed it outside of Hogwarts, aimed at the battlefield.

"The Goblin Army is waiting outside of Hogwarts" the king mentioned casually.

Harry knew it was not a matter of saying 'oh you didn't have to' – the Goblins had much riding on this war. If the wizards lost, Gringotts would be broke. If the wizards won, they had an excellent chance of raising their status with men. He nodded at him gratefully, and asked Hogwarts to raise the wards to allow them entrance to the grounds.

Harry walked over to his fireplace, and whispered farewell to his parents and Sirius. With proud tears in their eyes they hugged each

other, as they could not reach out and touch the son they were so well-pleased with.

The time to meet at Hagrid's hut was at hand. The centaurs, fairies and gnomes were there already, as was the Ministry and Order. Harry stood and placed his hands on Griphooks' shoulders.

"Father – Urush-Gai – thank you for all you have given me. You have raised me to be a Goblin warrior; you have called me your own. I have sent a copy of my will to Gringotts – please handle the issues if I do not make it. I hope to make you proud in battle."

King Flailhide looked on with approval. Griphook embraced Harry. "My son I am already proud. You will do the whole world honor today."

Harry turned to Winky and Dobby. "Dear friends – if I do not make it, my will contains a long list of people who may adopt you. You will never be homeless again." He grabbed them both in a heartfelt hug, and kissed them on their wrinkled heads.

"Harry Potter, sir" Dobby sniffed, "we house-elves are all fighting with you."

"Then we can't lose, Dobby" Harry smiled at him with no trace of teasing.

Winky grabbed Dobby in a hug. "Dobby return home to Harry Potter *and* Winky", and she gave the surprised elf a quick kiss on the cheek and ran off to her room crying.

Harry's final private words to Hermione were sent via the mind, not to be shared with the group, as were Luna's and Neville's to each other. Gentle kisses for luck were shared, and the group elf-popped to Hagrid's Hut, leaving Mrs. Longbottom, Winky, and Hermione's folks in the trunk, facing the telly with taunt nerves.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Dumbledore was in a rage yet again. He had always planned to stride out to the battlefield, Godric's sword at his side gleaming in the sun,

and 'sadly' watch Harry fail at his task. With dramatic tears in his eyes he would defeat Voldemort, sparks flashing from his sword, his phoenix singing at his side. The world again would honor him, bestow him medals and accolades, and modestly he would retire back to Hogwarts where the magic flowed from the very stones, empowering him beyond what any of the ministry fools could fathom.

But no – the very castle had turned on him and here he was, trapped in his office again. He glanced out the window at the Quiddich pitch, and furiously noted how many magical beings began to gather for the battle. A battle that couldn't possibly be won without him - Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

Fudge would miss him and come looking for him. Perhaps Cornelius could blast those stupid gargoyle steps into next week, and he could still save the day. If Harry somehow managed to kill Voldemort, in the heat of the clean-up battle he could obliviate enough people to make it look like it was done with his help. After all, he was the most powerful wizard in the world!

And the frustrated wizard paced the floor even more.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry looked around the crowd of hundreds with approval. There were scores of witches and wizards there – all the Weasleys, including a strong and even noble appearing Ron and Percy. All the Hogwarts professors were there, with the exception of Dumbledore, which frankly caught Harry by surprise. The Ministry was here in full force – it appeared most if not all the aurors were present, all departments were represented, and Madame Bones herself led them. Hundreds of witches and wizards from Britain stood, waiting expectantly for orders.

The centaurs stood, stomping the ground proudly off to one side of the crowd, testing their bows and checking the fletching on their arrows. Magorian trotted over and stood by Harry's side, and the Chosen One greeted him in the centaur tongue.

The full Goblin army stood at parade rest in formation, chanting war tunes that gladdened the hearts of the crowd. King Flailhide and Griphook stayed with the Founders, drinking the exciting anticipation for the battle to come that only a Goblin can taste and understand.

Hagrid and Grawp stood waiting with Harry. Hermione and Luna each held one of Grawp's hands and hugged his massive arms, as the giant wept with the realization he was accepted. Hagrid thumped him on the back with tearful pride.

Countless house-elves and fairies scattered through out the crowd, with wizards looking on in amazement. How had the Boy-Who-Lived rallied such an assorted army?

It was that moment, mere minutes before the army of magical beings was to march to the Quiddich pitch, that Fudge chose to appear and make a stand. Arrogantly, the portly ex-minister strode into the grounds and up to Harry, with a rag-tag group of wizards following.

Harry eyed the group with impatience. There was a dozen aurors, and perhaps twenty assorted witches and wizards, and each one of them radiated dissatisfaction and ambition. Fudge had gone out of his way to find anyone who hated their job and thought they deserved better, and obviously made all kinds of shallow political promises to them in return for their backing. Standing by Fudge's side was Delores Umbridge, with a hideous ear-to-ear smirk on her toad-like face.

"I have come to take my Ministry back" Fudge stated boldly to the 200 plus aurors and Madame Bones. She simply raised an eyebrow. "You, Harry Potter, I arrest for crimes against the wizards, stirring up a riot, and acting without ministry permission."

Amelia Bones stepped forward, her eyes flashing. "Cornelius Fudge, you were stripped of your job by the Wizengamot. You will cease this nonsense at ONCE!" Her wand was clenched in her white knuckles, and despite his false bravado, Fudge took a step backwards.

The cowardly egomaniac chose to defy the obvious reality in front of him. He spun on his heel and whipped out his wand, pointing it at Harry. "Expelliarmus!" he sputtered, and the spell, a weak one at that,

bounced off Harry's shields, and was absorbed by his armor and family rings. It didn't even tickle. Fudge stood staring at his wand and Harry, back and forth, mouth hanging open like a fool.

"Fudge," Bones growled dangerously, "what do you think you are doing? Lord Potter-Black is here to *kill Riddle!*"

"No, no – he can't! He's just a boy! He's a kid who's full of himself and will get us all killed! Can't you see that! You need me to lead you – not some child!" Fudge was babbling – in his vivid imagination he had pictured taking Harry down with a simple fourth year spell. The wizards and aurors in back of him were looking very sheepish and embarrassed, and more that a few started to inch away from his side.

Fudge noticed he had lost the small group's confidence, and with a white-hot fury again aimed his wand at Harry and started the forbidden words "ava...."

The disillusioned aurors had enough. With barely a glance at each other, several at once threw a full body-bind hex at the ex-minister, who froze in place and landed heavily on the ground. Harry sighed sadly, and turned to Dobby. "Dobby – please pop him into the Great Hall – we will deal with him later." The elf nodded and was back in seconds.

Bones looked at the nervous group of would-be traitors. "I imagine" she stated tersely, "that Fudge offered you each rewards, promotions, and perhaps gold for your backing. You can see now what a fool's errand it was. You now have a choice – follow Lord Potter-Black and myself against Riddle, or you can leave. Any aurors who choose to leave will naturally face charges when this is over. If you choose to stay and fight Riddle with us, any penalties will be greatly reduced."

With that, Harry looked at his chosen group of friends. "It's time" he simply stated. Pointing his wand to his throat, he muttered "*soronus*" and stood on Hagrid's shoulders to address the crowd.

***"Friends! Magical friends of all backgrounds! The time is now to end, for once and all, the evil that is Tom Riddle and his followers. His lies and deceit have ripped the very fabric of our communities for too long. For decades we have been poisoned***

***by his influence – fear, apathy, arrogance and prejudice. His time is OVER! Fight with me now for a better tomorrow – a future where all magical beings are equal and honored!”***

The crowd erupted into cheers and shouts. With Harry, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, Magorian, King Flailhide, and Dobby in front, and close behind Griphook, Madame Bones, Tonks & Remus, the Weasley clan, and much of the Order. The hundreds of beings marched the short distance to the Quiddich pitch, where Harry swiftly dropped the wards long enough for Riddle and his minions to enter.

It had crossed Harry and Amelia’s mind to let only Riddle in, and leave the rest of his army leaderless outside the wards to let the aurors clean up. After much discussion, they came to the conclusion it wasn’t honorable, but mostly they didn’t want the risk of losing any of the dark fighters who ran away. Better to contain the battle and deal with it at once.

The grounds were eerily silent as Riddle and his forces slithered, glided and walked in. He had werewolves, who were potion-induced into their monster forms, vampires, five giants, and under one hundred wizards and witches. Bella was close to his side, cackling insanely, and dementors floated hungrily above, chilling the air. The dark side was vastly outnumbered – a fact which wasn’t lost on Tom as he eyed the vast army in front of him with anger. But he smiled a wicked, oily smile – Harry’s group would fight a fair and noble fight. He would fight to win.

In movies there is always brave posturing and bantering when the rivals meet face to face. In books there is always the verbal barb that cuts to the heart of the bad guy, before he fights with rage and foul play. There is always that minute or so to catch your breath and plan your first move. This wasn’t the movies.

So much happened at once that eye witnesses never go it completely straight. Many mini-battles broke out at once, with slaving werewolves launching themselves on the aurors, dementors swooping down from the skies, and what ever dark wizards Riddle mustered concentrating their spells on Harry.

**O0o0o0o0o0o**

Still trapped in his office, Dumbledore rubbed his arm in boiling rage as he watched the battle erupt below. How could he get down there? Harry had managed to dredge up an army of amazing numbers – terribly outnumbering Voldemort's. At this rate Harry would succeed without him!

He howled a primal scream of rage, pain, impotence, and selfish anger.

In the battle below, beings closest to the castle heard a scream of such emotion and volume, despite themselves they glanced back at the tower from where the sound came. But they went back to fighting and didn't give it another thought until after.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Bane chose the moment the battle started to turn and fire a magical arrow at Harry. He hated the boy of prophecy more than any other arrogant humans. Riddle was no match for this crowd – the centaurs could take care of him and the ministry and go back to being kings of the forest.

Bane was an idiot. Luna saw the arrow out of the corner of her eye, and thrust her shield between it and Harry, who flashed a quick smile of thanks, and resumed taking care of the death eater in front of him. The black centaur's treachery did not go unnoticed – Magorian, with a neigh of anger, shot an arrow back – the phoenix-fledged one that Harry had made, and Bane the betrayer was no more.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

The dementors floated down, hungry and eager. Voldemort promised them a feast, and what a buffet was spread below them! The fear and terror rose on clouds of emotion, filling their dark senses with the closest thing to lust they could perceive. Voldemort was worth working for if this was how they were going to be fed!

But what was this? The dementors were not bright creatures – they were beings of dark magic, not capable of rational thought. They worked on hunger, animal instincts, and orders. They slowly turned and spun in bewilderment. Thousands upon thousands of glittering

fairies flew swiftly to meet them in the air. They broke off into like-color tribes and each dementor found it self encased in a sphere of glowing, tiny beings, holding hands and singing songs of love and goodness.

Dementors are beings of dark despair that suck all the happiness out of a person, leaving a husk of nothing but negative memories and emotions behind. Then they dine on the soul, feeding on it like a choice epicurean morsel. Once the soul is consumed, it is destroyed forever. The only way wizards know to battle a dementor is to raise a patronis – a light shield formed of joyful thoughts that the dementors can't bear. The fairies are beings of light whose strength is magic of enforcing health, love and healing. It was a toxic combination.

As the fairies sang and cast spell after spell at the surrounded dementors, the dark creatures felt pain for the first time in their lives. They felt the fear they caused. They felt defeat as they slowly withered and died, one by one, leaving nothing but black sooty ashes floating to the ground.

**OOoOoOoOoOoO**

Delores Umbridge had watched the ugly little house-elf disappear with her beloved Minister Fudge. After forcing a submissive look to her face during Bone's chewing out, she dissolved into the crowd of wizards and beasts waiting for the battle. Potter would pay for humiliating Cornelius like that. He would pay.

The malevolent witch bided her time once the battle erupted. She threw a few half hearted hexes at random enemies, but concentrated more on making sure she didn't get hit with a stray spell while inching closer to Potter. She spotted him in the distance, fighting like a tornado, throwing hexes, curses, sword slashes and more with blinding speed and fury. Her eyes narrowed with unnatural hate. This mere boy had caused her so much humiliation and aggravation. And *nobody* messes with Delores. Even her housemates in Hogwarts knew not to mess with her. Even the rest of the Slytherins learned to respect her.

Finally Umbridge found her self close enough to Potter to hurt him. She gripped her wand with white-knuckled determination, an evil grin

spreading on her flabby face. But, unfortunately for her, someone saw what was going on in her hate-filled head.

Dobby had just finished body-slamming a vampire across the pitch, when he saw a figure wearing a disgusting pink fuzzy sweater slide past him, an unfriendly look in her eye. What did ex-professor Umbridge want here? She wasn't battling – she could have easily taken down that Death Eater approaching from her other side. She didn't even see him. She was glaring at his beloved Harry Potter's back with frightening hatred.

The house-elf found himself swelling with indignation. He remembered Winky telling him how their beloved Master still had nightmares regarding the blood quill that witch had used on him. He recalled how Umbridge refused to believe that You-Know-Who had returned, and punished his beloved Master for saying so. Dobby recalled Mistress Hermione saying Umbridge tried to cast an unforgivable on his Master. And as she raised her wand and started to aim it at his Master's back, Dobby knew he had to act.

Dobby reached over and snapped his fingers at Umbridge. A puff of smoke and loud pop, and on the ground was a very fat, bloated toad in a fuzzy pink sweater. The toad looked around, gave a loud croak of outrage, and started to hop off the battleground.

**00o0o0o0o00o0**

Grawp's eyes glittered as the battle ignited. Hagrid was using a log to bash in the heads of werewolves, so he looked for something he could use. Not finding any logs handy, he picked up a struggling Death Eater by the legs and used him as a club. The Death Eater did not appreciate it, but he didn't protest for very long.

They made a great team, wading into the tiny humans, goblins and centaurs waste deep and swinging at anything wearing black with a mask. It was fun! Then Grawp's eyes spied his former tribe, fighting Hagrid's friends across the field. He remembered Glurg – always hurting him, pushing him, making him feel bad. Well now Grawp had friends, and friends worth fighting for! He would teach Glurg.

Running over to his former tribe with earth-pounding steps, Grawp roared with the voice of years of frustration, and lunged for the Glurg, Hagrid right behind him. Goblin, human and centaur gladly backed off to let the giants fight their own, and avoid getting squished beneath enormous feet and packed between ginormous toes.

When the battle of the giants was finished, few noticed, being caught up in their own individual struggles of life and death. But Luna and Hermione heard the death cry of the brave Garwp and knew they would have to cry later. Grawp lay broken on the ground, as did the other five giants that came with Tom Riddle. Hagrid was seriously injured, his left arm tore clean off his body, but Fawkes came and cried on his grievous wounds and healed him. With a grunt of thanks to the phoenix, Hagrid rose and grabbed his log and waded back, one-armed, into the fray.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

Hermione, right before the start of the battle, sent word to Marvin the squid. *“My friend – our battle is starting in just a few moments! Please warn the merpeople and keep yourselves safe!”*

*“Friend Hermione! What can I do to help?”* the squid came back to her mind.

*“Keep yourself from harm, my friend. You are one of a kind and I don’t want you hurt!”* She cut the connection and resumed hexing a vampire into the beyond.

Marvin sent word to the merfolk and came to the top of the lake to watch. The scent of blood and fear overwhelmed him. He could pick up several telepathic voices in the sea of land peoples, including two very close by. He swiveled his giant eyes over to the shore and observed.

The twins and Percy were faced off with Bella Lestrangle. She was drooling and shrieking with glee, blood lust, and madness. They were firing off hexes and shields, while the twins were mind-speaking back and forth on the Weasley Network “you do the shield”, and ‘oh – block that – she is aiming for Perce’, and ‘boy I hope Harry is all right’. Bella

was holding her own – unable to feel pain with her insanity, she was practically unstoppable.

Marvin listened with interest. The two red-haired men were fighting for Harry, Hermione's fiancé! Marvin was certainly on their side then. The crazed witch shooting dark spells at them with abandon was not something he wanted to side with. With a long tentacle, he scooped the rabid woman up and kept her bound helpless, suspended in the air.

Fred, George and Percy just stood there gaping at the helpless witch turning purple in the tight grasp of the squid. *"Hello – my name is Marvin"* a voice came into their heads. *"Do you by any chance know James Weasley?"*

The twins looked at each other in amazement. They were talking with the giant squid! *"Er, James Weasley was our Grandfather. I'm George, this here is Fred, and the brother here who can't hear you is Percy."*

*"Oh joy!"* Marvin gushed *"Friend Hermione said there were two Weasleys who would be able to speak with me! Will you be my friends too?"*

*"Marvin, we would be proud to be your mates, but, um, we are kind of busy right at the moment"* Fred replied, taking down a pair of hinkypunks heading for them.

*"Of course you are – I'd be honored to help. What would you like me to do with this?"* and the squid shook his tentacle bound captive. It pulled Bella closer to his eyes and said *"oh – sorry – never mind. I guess I was a little too excited."*

Marvin dropped Bella on the shore where she landed with a sickening wet 'plop', mangled and crushed. Fred and George grinned at each other while Percy turned faintly green, wondering what was going on. *"Wicked!"* the twins crowed in unison.

*"Marvin new friend, if you want to do that to any wizards or witches wearing those same robes and mask; go right ahead!"* George told him with excitement.

*“Yah! Goblins, centaurs, and elves are cool – they are on our side. But vampires and Death Munchers – go for it!”* Fred added.

*“I will talk with you soon, new friends!”* Marvin called with merriment as he scooped another Death Eater into the air that wandered too close to the lake’s shore.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The boggarts could have been nasty, but as soon as a pair of evil vampires opened the large crate that housed them, gnomes came running out of the surrounding forest and field, darting in between the fighter’s legs, and shooting spells on the creatures. The boggarts barely had time to sense a single fear before they all found themselves turned into fluffy little bunnies. And they couldn’t change back.

Many bunnies died that day. The clean-up crews after the battle could not figure out why so many rabbits had wandered into the middle of a raging war to be crushed and trampled under foot.

But many rabbits managed to escape into the wood and meadow. For years afterwards students would swear the bunnies of Hogwarts could be seen changing color from time to time, and the color seemed to reflect the mood of the observer. Naturally, parents and friends would tend to scoff. Why would a rabbit change color?

Because it was the only ability the boggarts had left.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

The battle was in full swing now, noisy, bloody, and not the clean stuff of heroics you typically read. Men were growing tired, magical beings concerned for their future, and Riddle getting just a touch cocky, when the surface of the lake broke.

There, peeking out of the water was the hundreds of heads of the merfolk. They smiled at the crusade taking place and closed their eyes.

In an instant everyone's minds was filled with music. Indescribable music – song that filled the souls of those fighting for the light, and thrust a red-hot dagger of fear in every heart battling for the dark. It was song with out words they knew, played on instruments never formed, and never heard by a flesh and blood ear,

And combined with Fawke's phoenix song, it gave the light the courage and strength needed to rally.

Argus Filch, new wizard and proud of it, was fighting next to Professor Flitwick's side. Although he hadn't learned more than a few hexes and blocking spells from his beloved teacher, he practiced hard day and night, delighting in his newfound ability. He wanted to prove himself – to the world, and particularly Albus Dumbledore.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a green spell speeding toward the tiny charms professor. Without a moment's fear or hesitation, he threw himself bodily in front to block it, and was killed on the spot. Argus Filch had redeemed himself.

## Chapter 35

### Wafer Thin Mint

Severus Snape was having a rough time at first. Once it became apparent the potion's master was indeed fighting for the light, there were quite a few Death Eaters that wanted to revenge their master personally. Snape wasn't sure if it was revenge, or simply jealousy – he had escaped the clutches of Riddle and hadn't been crucio'd all summer. The difficulty came from the sheer numbers of dark wizards targeting him, not from their skill by any stretch of the imagination.

The Death Eaters left in Riddle's camp were pitiful. With a trademark sneer and billowing of robes, Severus got to work, and found himself viciously enjoying the battle. Here was a chance to use more creative spells, duel like the master he was, not holding back. No coddling student duelers, drying their tears and soothing their hurt egos afterwards. No having to hear "but you *can't* use that spell, Severus – it could be considered *dark!*" He was whirling and striking with deadly grace and accuracy.

The only thing missing in his life was knowing Harry would have the pleasure of killing Riddle – not he. He worked his way closer to the Founders, torturing Death Eaters with a variety of disgusting spells he had been just itching to try for years. Snape finally found himself where Riddle could see him. He wanted nothing more than for that sick moron to see just which side he'd truly been on all this time. Snape even thought about sticking his tongue out at the dictator and going "nyegh" at him. How mature, he smirked to himself. He had been teaching way, way too long.

The dark-eyed wizard was dueling with a young Death Eater. He had no idea who was behind the silver mask – Riddle had obviously recruited anyone and anything he could get his hands on during the summer, regardless of talent or ability. Snape was toying with his opponent, using a variety of flashy spells to hopefully get Riddle's attention for just a moment. After all, it *would* help Harry if Riddle had to process this slap in the face on top of everything else.

Out of the blue a dead vampire came flying through the sky – probably thrown by Hagrid. It would have been a 'good thing', but

unfortunately its landing site was where Snape was currently standing. Severus saw it coming out of the corner of his eye and moved just before becoming a potion master pancake. But it was all the distraction his opponent needed, and he managed to slice Snape's arm with a vicious cutting hex. Now Snape was angry.

Oddly enough, it wasn't the yelling, the sparks or the puffs of flashy smoke that got Riddle's attention. It was the gross spectacle of one of his new junior Death Eaters standing for a second before collapsing, having been turned inside out. "Now that was some creative spell work" Riddle gawked with admiration. Until he saw who had performed the hex. "YOU!" he screamed with fury at his former Death Eater.

Ah yes – it was a very good day, Snape decided.

**0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Minerva McGonagall heaved a silent sigh. She had not taken part in a battle in over 60 years now. Although her bones and joints argued that this was not the best way to spend her declining years, she felt the decades of experience more than made up for her physical limitations. She tucked a stray strand of hair back into her bun and blotted the blood off her forehead with her sleeve. Stupid slashing hexes.

She glanced around the battlefield catching her breath. The few Death Eaters Riddle had left were clustered around their leader attacking both Harry and Snape with no results. She smiled warmly at the sight. An occasional vampire or werewolf would make its way toward where she was fighting along side other order members and teachers, but they were quickly dispatched. Although it wasn't the most active place, she wanted to stand here, near the castle, and make sure none of the enemy tried to enter Hogwarts.

*'Where is Sybil?'* she glanced around. *'For that matter, where is Albus?'* She had really expected him to cause some sort of mischief – try to steal Harry's thunder one way or another. Of all the unflattering things she could say about the headmaster, coward was not one of them.

While keeping one eye on the battle and watching Hogwarts for signs of Albus or enemies, she spied McNair trying to sneak to the front doors. She pinched her lips into a thin, disapproving line. She never liked the man – especially when he came to execute Hagrid's Hippogriff three years ago. Anyone who enjoys killing like that was suspect in her opinion. Minerva sent a bludgeoning hex toward the man, blasting him away from the door. He sent one back, breaking her arm, and leaving the elderly witch wandless and at his mercy.

Clutching her shattered arm and reeling with pain, Minerva gave a futile look for her wand. With straight back and brave eye she waited for the killing hex she knew would come. It was not to happen that day, however – Ron Weasley, who had seen McNair skulking toward the castle had followed as quickly as he could. With a roar of rage and Gryffindor courage, he flung himself into the altercation between the executioner and his head of house.

McNair barely knew what hit him. He heard the yell and saw the blinding flash of red hair. He felt the pain, and the Death Eater was no more.

Minerva gave a nod of pride and gratitude to her Gryffindor cub. She muttered a quick numbing charm on her arm and continued to stand watch. Nobody was going to enter her school unless they belonged there. Ron continued to fight at her side.

**0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Remus and Tonks found themselves back to back in the center of a ring of seven werewolves. The fearsome beasts were snapping their drooling jaws, snarling and circling, eyes glowing with hate. Remus almost rolled his eyes – how fitting a way to die – devoured by his own kind.

Mr. And Mrs. Lupine had worked their way off to the side of the grounds, and now surrounded by werewolves, they were on their own. *'Ironical – I managed to keep from harming anyone as a werewolf, and now I'm going to become werewolf chow'* the ex-DADA professor mused to himself. *'Wish I could get a glance at that watch Harry gave me for Christmas – I wonder what it looks like to have all the hands pointed at 'mortal peril'.'*

“Well baby, I always wanted to go out with a bang” Tonks laughed, a touch bitterly, and turned her nose into a wolf snout. True – a hero’s death is cool if you *have* to die, but she really *liked* living. They started firing a flurry of hexes at the seven monsters, catching their fur on fire. Most animals hate fire – it did manage to scare off three of them.

“You do know I love you, Tonks” Remus spoke to his wife as they caught their breath.

“Back at ‘cha” she replied, firing off another volley of hexes as the werewolves made to lunge again.

Remus caught the sight of one monster out of the corner of his eye. It was Fenrir Greyback – the very same werewolf that had bit him as a child. It had launched itself straight for his wife. Without thinking Lupin threw himself between Tonks and Fenrir - he would die before his wife had to live her life in the pain and misery he suffered.

Gasping, tears in her eyes, Tonks glanced at the bloody carnage going between her husband and Greyback. Strengthened with fury, she hexed like crazy the remaining three werewolves. Caught by surprise at the strength and passion of her attack, two were killed and the last limped off. Spinning on her heel she turned to see Remus, badly mangled, choking the life out of Greyback with his bare hands. The evil Fenrir Greyback was finally removed from the gene pool, but at a very high cost.

**0o0o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

There was temporary lull in the battle. Harry didn’t know if it had been hours or minutes since the attack began. He stood proudly, breathing heavily and glaring at Tom, who was screaming in fear inside his head, and attempting to bully his troops into stronger resistance. The light was winning overall – it was never in question. But how to defeat Riddle? Harry and Neville’s strongest hexes just bounced off of him. Hermione’s cleverest curses seemed to evaporate. He wasn’t using shielding charms – he was an animated shield on two feet. If he didn’t destroy Riddle totally, he’d just come back again and again, like a bad rock ballad from the 80s. Or worse yet, bellbottoms.

He stepped forward, closer to Riddle, and the dark forces in the vicinity instinctively backed away. Righteous anger over the death of his parents, his friends and the innocents flooded Harry's senses and he neared the leader of evil. This *had* to end today!

"You can't defeat me" Riddle hissed at Harry. "I am the most powerful wizard who ever lived."

Harry ignored the bantering, concentrating on Riddles' thoughts and where his hands were at all times. Tom shot a series of particularly nasty dark hexes that would have killed lesser wizards, but Harry deftly deflected the spells with Godric's sword and wandless shields. Riddle paused, catching his breath, eyes white with fear.

*"How do I kill him?"* Harry thought. And unbidden, the old words of Dumbledore came to his mind. *"Love. Love, Harry, is the power he knows not."*

At that moment a revelation broke through. Harry smiled at Tom, who was gasping for breath. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and knew without looking it was the firm loving grip of Griphook, his father. And with less surprise than he would have thought possible, the Goblin actually slid and merged into Harry, becoming one being. Fawkes trilled a song of triumph, and melted into the Chosen One. He felt a small hand on his hip, and looked down to see Dobby smiling up at him with tears of fierce pride and love in his eyes. Harry returned the look and Dobby merged within as well. A strong hand clapped him on the head, almost knocking him over, and he looked up with affection to see the glittering black eyes of a one-armed Hagrid – his first friend ever - smiling down at him, who promptly merged as well. Then he looked to his side to see Magorian, with a deep gash across his muscular chest, come up and give him a look of complete trust and pride. Magorian too joined in the new being that was Harry.

Riddle shook his head in disbelief. Right in front of him Potter's animal comrades in arms were melting away, blending into the Boy-Who-Lived. He weakly raised his wand to attempt a *avada kedavra* out of panic-driven desperation, but it was simply blocked by the sword of Slytherin and shield of Ravenclaw thrust in front of Potter.

Slytherin's sword? "NO" Riddle screamed, spit flying from his lips. *"I am the heir of Slytherin!"*

Hermione shot Riddle a scathing look. "Not any more, Riddle." And she too, joined with her fiancé, merging into his very being.

"MY NAME IS VOLDEMORT! LORD VOLDEMORT!" he screamed in rage.

Neville laughed and made a rude finger gesture at the leader of the dark. "Bugger off, Riddle" and he joined in the new being that was Harry Potter.

"Oh – me too, me too!" quipped Luna, who was the last to blend into the now shining brightness that was The Chosen One.

The light grew and grew, until the battle ceased and every being stood to watch what was happening in the center of the field. The noise dropped from deafening clanging and screams to an eerie silence. The light was now blinding, and everyone had to squint or shield their eyes, including the terrified Tom Riddle, quivering in fetal position on the ground. The white light slowly faded, and in its place stood a dragon, 30 foot in height and shining pure white in radiance.

The dragon stood on two enormous feet and glared down at Riddle who slowly stood trembling in awe. His wand was limp in his shaking fingers, and the few surviving Death Eaters started to run for the Hogwarts's gates, only to find themselves trapped within the grounds.

The dragon that was Harry lifted his arms, and Riddle was terrified to see it had four of them – and in each hand was a sword or the shield of the Founders. Tom realized at that moment it was going to be a lousy end to an awful week. He was hosed.

*"Is everyone all right?"* Harry mind-spoke with his friends whom had merged within. *"Hang tight – I don't think this will take long."*

*"Do what you must – you have the control Harry"* Griphook sent back and other similar messages of encouragement were voiced in return. Harry could feel the power, love and magic from all of them, and all their thoughts and emotions filling him to overflowing.

The dragon bent its huge head down and glared at Tom Riddle, brandishing the magical weapons. But instead of striking a physical blow, the dragon/Harry opened his mouth and shot a flame at Riddle – not of fire, but of pure light magic. It was impossible to look at, white beyond white, light beyond sun. And when he stopped and shut his mouth, Riddle's lifeless body lay on the ground, staring up at the sun with empty eyes.

Screams of pain and surprise were heard from around the battleground as the remaining Death Eaters collapsed and died, clutching their arms. For a moment the world stood still as shocked beings realized the evil that was Voldemort was indeed dead.

A loud wail of agony came from in back of the Dragon/Harry, and he recognized the voice as Tonks'. He turned to see in back of him a seriously wounded Remus lying in Tonks' arms as she wailed and pleaded with him to stay with her. Gently, ever so carefully Harry bent his head down and opened his mouth, breathing a soft flame of magic at the last of the marauders, who woke up, blinked, and stood shakily, gaping at the sword-wielding dragon that had just healed him.

The Dragon/Harry then lifted his head towards the sky and shouted out a rallying cry, and the light appeared again, although dimmer, and the Founders and Friends all separated from Harry, and resumed what was left of the battle.

**OOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Tom Malvolo Riddle, last surviving heir of Slytherin, felt his life and soul blasted from his flesh and blood. 'Oh well' he thought to himself, 'I'm sure there's a place in paradise for the greatest wizard who ever lived.'

He floated lazily above the battle for a bit, bored with the goings on. If he couldn't be the victor, he didn't care who won and who died. He tried to direct himself toward the ground, to find a snake or perhaps one of those many insane rabbits to possess, but was unable – an annoying cloud of fairies was following him, keeping him from the earth. Too bad Nagini was dead – she would have made a superb body. No matter – now the beyond waited, and perhaps he could conquer that.

Far above the musing soul of Riddle hovered the very last of the dementors. It was smaller, weaker than the others and would have been considered timid if dementors had emotions. It had watched with detachment as the fairies entrapped and destroyed all the rest. It was alone, the very last dementor in existence.

It was so very hungry, and the hot emotions wafting up from the battle below were so heady, so delightful and enticing, it would have drooled if it was able. Wasn't there anything it could eat without getting near the dangerous fairies?

Then it sensed something coming up to it – a meal-to-go! Of all the souls that were freed today, everyone had disappeared in an instant to the beyond before the lone dementor could even get a taste. And here was one, coming right up to it! It was dripping with fear, anger, and malice, basted with hate. The dementor quivered with anticipation.

The dementor greedily slurped Riddle's soul up with one gluttonous breath. And promptly exploded. Sometimes you really can eat just too much.

## Chapter 36

### Hogwarts After the War

Mrs. Norris, Filch's mangy cat, sat safely in the castle watching from a window. She had watched her companion of all these years, wondering why her familiar never used magic to do his work. She never blamed him for hating the students – she did too. She never questioned his bitterness – after all, she was very acrimonious herself about being trapped in cat form. But after years of living like a squib, Argus had suddenly taken to using magic with an intensity that was scary. Any kind of commitment, beyond that of taking a familiar for herself, was pretty intimidating in her opinion. Argus had been a satisfactory familiar at least.

And now the fool insisted on fighting in the silly war. Well, not her. If he wanted to risk his neck over other wizard's squabbles, so be it. But she would stay nice and safe in Hogwarts. If something happened to her pet, she could always get a new one – Albus was always glad to help her out.

Mrs. Norris was shocked, however, when her Argus not only got himself killed, he did it willingly to protect one of the professors. With a screech of anger, she watched him collapse on the ground, slain by an unmentionable curse, and in that instant, felt her own life ripped from her body. Albus never mentioned that bonding with a creature to make it your familiar had its risks and drawbacks.

Long after the battle, when the professors and volunteers were checking the rooms in the castle, it was Filius Flitwick himself that found the cold, lifeless cat draped over the window ledge. "Poor kitty" he crooned sadly, cradling the dead cat and stroking its fur. "You loved him so much, you couldn't live without him."

Argus Filch and Mrs. Norris were buried together on the school grounds, in a small, little-known cemetery near the border of Hogsmeade and the school. Although the former caretaker was laid to rest, having found peace, Mrs. Norris continued to prowl the hallways as a ghost, glaring at students who were sneaking out for a late night snack or romantic rendezvous. Sadly, the mere ghost of a

cat is incapable of getting students in trouble. Eternity was going to be a drag.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

Wormtail was curled up in his cage, contentedly gnawing on a rat chewy. At first he was terrified of being caught and given over to Harry Potter, but it turned out to be quite nice. He was safe and secure; in a magical trunk it seemed, hidden from the aurors and Voldemort alike. The girls had felt sorry for him, and expanded the cage to a nice size, and made sure he had plenty of clean pine chips, tasty food, and things to chew on. He hadn't been curcio'd in a full week now!

He knew the final battle was going on and he was quite relieved not to have to be in it. He had always assumed that Voldemort would force him to go, and quite frankly, he knew he was a weak wizard and a total coward. Now he was safe and hidden. The house-elf Winky, the mudblood's muggle parents and Mrs. Longbottom were all sitting on the sofa watching the battle on a magical canvas, hugging each other with fear. Potter was winning – he knew he would before the first spell was fired. Peter turned his back to the canvas and found a nice, plump sunflower seed to nibble on. He would be completely content to live out his life like this, if only they would position his cage so Padfoot and that awful cat-kneezle weren't glaring at him all the time.

It was a nice plan, but it wasn't to come to pass. After all, although Pettigrew wasn't the *most* evil of the Death Eaters, he had committed many sins and there is always a price to pay and lessons to be learned. Probably the first lesson should have been 'never accept the dark mark'.

Being in his rat form, his dark mark was gone into another dimension with his human form and clothing. So he wasn't killed instantly like the others on the battlefield. But the magical jolt of Riddles death forced him to transform back into human, against his will. And the cage was charmed to be unbreakable.

In the heat of the battle, Winky was the only one in Godric's Suitcase that heard a faint "squeek! Ow!" and a disgusting squelching sound.

She looked over her shoulder at Wormtails' cage and paled. This would take a long, long time to clean up. At least the others didn't hear it. She charmed a tablecloth to hide the mess that Sirius Black was gazing at with an odd mixture of disgust and glee. Winky would deal with it later.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

The last war of Tom Riddle ended soon after his death. The remaining Death Eaters collapsed and died on the spot, tied to his soul by the evil bond of the Death Mark. The vampires had been destroyed by the centaurs, and the Goblins gladly took care of the werewolves. All remaining dark fighters were easily taken care of by the wizards and elves.

Harry and his friends sat down on a grassy mound near where Riddle's last stand had taken place, catching their breath. Riddle's lifeless face was locked in an eternal expression of terror, and several aurors were examining the body in weak relief. The Boy-Who-Survived looked around the field, but didn't feel any elation – just deep sorrow for the dead. Losses were actually few – a dozen brave Goblins, two centaurs, five aurors (one of which had come with Fudge, but saw the error of his ways), seven house-elves and three wizards. But the loss of even one is tremendous, and Harry grieved.

Harry turned and watched a several fairies came streaking out of the sky and flitted around Luna's head in an obvious state of excitement. Luna smiled and happily said to the three of them "He's gone for good. They just told me it worked, and Riddle's soul is completely destroyed, as were all of the dementors."

The four founderettes collapsed for a bit, their mental and physical weariness catching up with them all at once. They had succeeded – the era of hyphenated-title-names was over.

Luna treated Magorian's chest wound and noticed he was limping. Summoning a hoof-pick, with his permission she gently lifted his hind leg and deftly got to work, cleaning out impacted matter. With a flick she removed a large chunk of debris, lurid pink and gray. With a start Dobby recognized the clump of gooey pink from the centaur's hoof – it resembled Delores Umbridge's shrunken sweater, a bit worse for

wear. He examined it closer. Yes - it was definitely a tiny knit garment, and a webbed foot or two in there. The house-elf, with far less guilt than one normally associated with the race, swiftly kicked Umbridge's remains behind a large rock.

"You have quite the touch, fairy-witch" Magorian smiled with an expression that was sincere but not use to being on his face. He stomped on his back leg with satisfaction. "All better."

Harry gestured Minister Bones over and formally introduced her to Magorian. It was a short meeting, but the start of great things between the races of man and man-horse.

Luna next got to work on Hagrid's torso where his left arm had been. Other than that, the core group of eight was relatively unscathed, except for multiple cuts and bruises. Slowly the surviving forces got to their feet and carried the wounded to the castle where Madame Pomfrey and a team from St. Mungo's waited to heal the hurt. The dead were carried in as well, and laid with reverence on one side of the great hall on biers conjured for them.

Madame Bones took control with crisp authority, directing the care of the wounded, organizing food from the kitchens to be prepared by the female house-elves (who called in for help), and the arrests of dark wizards that hadn't taken the dark mark, but fought on Riddles' side.

Hermione staggered with weariness to the lake's edge and transfigured, swimming deep but slow.

The merfolk were floating around Marvin, stroking his tentacles and singing. Hermione smiled and let the music pour into her, over her and through her with a cleansing flow. She swam up and hugged Marvin's tentacle and as many as her friends as she could.

*"Thank you"* was all she could say.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Harry stood a bit awkwardly in the Great Hall. The wards had been lifted so aurors could apparate in and out of the grounds with prisoners, and reporters came circling like sharks. He tuned out the

questions fired at him and ignored them, letting his friends point them over to Madame Bones who was use to that sort of thing.

There was a bit of a shock when Cornelius Fudge was found dead, hanging from one of the light sconces in a dark corner of the hall. A painting in the hall verified that he had come out of the body-bind hex and killed himself. They took his body down as discreetly as possible, and laid it to rest with the others.

Harry had traded handshakes and back poundings with Snape, all the Weasleys, countless politicians and well wishers. The Goblins stayed for a bite to eat and marched back home, the centaurs long since having returned to the forest with their dead.

Sitting on one of the great tables with arms draped around Hermione, Neville and Luna, Harry really just wanted to hide in Godric's suitcase and let Winky, who was wrapped alternately around his legs and Dobby's waist sobbing with relief, pamper him a bit.

Hermione's parents and Neville's Gran were there too, having left the trunk to join in helping the wounded. Harry noticed Professor McGonagall coming toward him at a brisk pace. She had a bandage above one eye and an arm in a sling, but other than that appeared to be well.

"Potter, have you seen Albus?" she asked him, while scanning the crowded hall. "I really expected him to make a showing."

"No, professor, now that you mention it." He looked around the room too. He *had* expected Dumbledore to try and stop him, or at least take credit for anything he accomplished.

The elderly witch sighed with worry and annoyance. "Could you four please come with me – I want to check his office, but I am frankly frightened. He's rather unhinged."

They nodded, hopped off the table they were sitting on, and followed her to the headmaster's tower.

They stood at the gargoyle, trying all manner of passwords to no avail. At the point of giving up, Lady Hogwarts appeared, smiling at the four.

“Congratulations, heroes. The Founders are celebrating your victory.” She held out her hands in supplication, politely ignoring the gaping coming from the transfiguration professor.

“Thank you, Lady Hogwarts” Harry and the founderettes bowed to her. “Lady, where is Professor Dumbledore?”

She frowned slightly. “I don’t know, Heir of Gryffindor. He is not in the castle, which confuses me – I locked him in his tower this morning. He changed the password last night – it is sour grapes.” With that, she disappeared.

“Sour Grapes?” Neville asked, and the stairs started moving. They jumped on, with McGonagall in the lead.

It was a sad sight that met their eyes. There, on the floor of his office, lay Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, cold and stiff in rigid mortis. His right hand was clutched to his chest, and his mouth and eyes open in a never ending scream of the rage that ruled his life over the last years. Minerva gasped and turned away, tears of sorrow and loss in her eyes. Harry respectfully closed Dumbledore’s eyes and mouth with a wave of his hand, and Luna started scanning the headmaster’s body with her wand.

“Heart attack” she diagnosed after a bit. “Massive heart failure.”

“That’s why he kept rubbing his left arm?” Harry asked his fairy-friend. She nodded.

“Then who trashed his office?” McGonagall asked bewildered.

“He did” Harry sighed. “He did it quite often.” Harry insisted on levitating Dumbledore’s body to the Great Hall and giving it a bier of honor in front of the head table. He was once a great wizard.

**OOoOOoOOoOOo**

The final weeks before school were a blur. Harry gave Luna’s father and Rita Skeeter a joint exclusive interview with the eight of them to be used in both papers. The wizarding world ate up the full story of

Tom Riddle, Harry Potter, and all who fought on the side of the light. So many wizard families had no clue as to the real nature of Goblin, Centaur, Merfolk, giant or elf. The interviews with the magical beings really opened the eyes of the human public.

Madame Bones and Harry agreed to leave Dumbledore's and Fudge's treachery out of the news, and gave them hero's funerals, albeit quiet and reserved ones.

Harry and his friends visited Diagon Alley in goblin disguise so they could buy their seventh year books and supplies, and visit Griphook in peace. Headmistress McGonagall and Madame Bones offered to bypass their last year and graduate the four of them, but they chose to do the year with the rest of their classmates.

They visited St Mungos to see the wounded from the battle that had been transferred there from Hogwarts, and see if with joint magic they could heal Neville's parents. The four of them held hands and circled around Mrs. Longbottom first, as she seemed the more cognizant, and concentrated their magic. They entered her mind and looked around, decided it looked very much like the kind of room a person builds in their thoughts for occlumency training, and split up to explore. Harry saw it first – sickly green webbing barricading a thick door in the frail woman's mind. *"Over here"* he called telepathically to his friends. Neville came running from a corner of his mother's mind he had been exploring. They pulled at the threads, clearing the door, and stepped back.

*"Now what?"* Neville asked his friends. Harry shrugged and knocked on the door.

*"Who is it?"* came a frightened child's voice. The door cracked a bit and a bright blue eye peeked out.

*"Mum? Is that you?"* Neville crouched down, level with the frightened face peering out.

*"Why do you call me mum? You can't be my Neville – you're a grown up."* The door cracked open just a tad more, so they could see a little frightened girl inside.

A tear trickled down Neville's cheek. *"Mum, it's me. You've been asleep a very long time. Please come out – I need you back."*

*"If I come out, will it hurt?"* Mrs. Longbottom the girl opened the door about a foot, looking from one face to the other. She was crying and trembling. *"That bad lady hurt me so much – she wouldn't stop. I cried and begged, and she just wouldn't stop! I had to hide in here to get away!"*

*"No mum – the pain is gone. It's safe now. Voldemort is dead, the mean lady is dead – come back home now."* Neville held out his hand, and his mother nodded at him, pushing open the door and running into his arms.

The four of them left Mrs. Longbottom's mind and broke the connection. Neville's mom gave a slight gasp, opened her eyes and looked around in bewilderment. Her gaze fell on Neville, who was crying freely, and she softly asked "baby?"

Luna, Hermione and Harry stepped away to give them some privacy. They sat down to rally their strength for Mr. Longbottom. After a few joyful moments with his mother, Neville called over "can we do dad now?"

The experience was pretty much the same with Neville's father, except instead of hiding from the intense pain that put him there as a small boy, he was a young man, fishing on the bank of a lake, and really didn't want to stop. Once Neville convinced him the 'vacation' was over, he gladly came with him.

Love and relief poured out of the trio that day. The Longbottoms were discharged back to Longbottom manor, to the astonished delight of Neville's Gran.

Harry, Luna, and Hermione stayed at the hospital, however, and were able to heal many of the 'permanent' residents, who woke with joy and wonder to the rest of their lives.

Sadly, Gilderoy Lockhart was one of those who recovered.

Another happy surprise was that on the next full moon, Remus Lupin, one of the last of the werewolves, found himself unable to drink the wolfsbane potion- one sip made him violently sick. On a whim, his wife Tonks handed him a silver spoon, which he hesitantly touched with a fingertip. It didn't burn. He grasped it – it didn't hurt.

He still insisted that his wife lock him in his cage in the basement that night, but when the moon shone clearly through the window, he stood unchanging and smiling at his grinning wife.

Before the next full moon Harry and the seven heroes once more became the white dragon and healed the remaining werewolves in the country who gathered at Hogwarts. Most adults had died fighting for Riddle, but there had been a few who had refused him, and many children. Healed by the white dragon, the werewolves were now gone from Britain.

**OOoOOoOOoOOoOOo**

Madame Bones set up a better government, gladly voted in by the Wizengamot. The magical world was now jointly run by her, Griphook of the Goblins, Firenze of the centaurs, Icy of the house-elves (one of the Malfoy former elves), and Hagrid. Although there were no more giants in the world as far as anyone knew, there turned out to be quite a few half-giants such as Hagrid and Olympia, and they needed to be treated as citizens and not monsters.

The Goblins were very content. Interest rates were low enough to spur the economy, business boomed over night, and now they had the respect and rights they deserved.

The centaurs after that war were never asked insensitive questions about 'being bred' or 'ridden'. Wizards saw them as beings at last, and asked for their observations on tidings. It was all the centaurs ever wanted – acknowledgement of their abilities and talents.

The house-elves didn't change over night. Although thanks to Dobby's new found fame, wizards finally realized how powerful they were, and abuse slowed considerably, it took a while for them to learn how to expect and even demand good treatment. But it did come eventually.

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The school year started pretty much the same as always. Harry packed up Godric's Suitcase and apparated to the train station with his friends. The immediate difference was the casual air at 9 ¾ - a noticeable lack of aurors, parents not quite so teary-eyed, and children looking excited to get away instead of clinging with fright to their sobbing mothers. With Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle gone, they enjoyed their first stress-free ride to Hogwarts ever.

Sitting in the Great Hall, Harry sat with Hermione, the Head Girl, and Neville, the Head Boy. Luna was sitting composedly by herself at the Ravenclaw table. They kept shooting sad glances over to the Slytherin table, which held maybe a quarter of the students it used to. Many of the former Slytherins had been Death Eaters (they learned Crabbe and Goyle, although not at the battle and hiding under their beds at home, had foolishly taken the Dark Mark), or the orphans of Death Eaters, and no longer attending Hogwarts. The remaining Silver and Greens looked more than a little lost.

Harry was surprised and pleased to see both Remus and Tonks sitting at the head table. Now that Remus was no longer a werewolf, there was no reason the talented teacher couldn't work at Hogwarts. Without the curse in him, the man looked younger and more fit than Harry could ever have hoped for.

Professor Sprout proudly led the first years up the center of the hall to the Sorting Hat. The hat twitched and opened its tear to sing:

*I hope you all ate on the train  
For this will take a while  
There are many we need to sort  
More than walked this aisle*

*The light has won and Riddle's gone  
To where I think it's very hot  
Our leadership has changed  
So let's see what we've got*

*The house of Slytherin  
You must not shun or ban*

*The recent evil that has happened  
Did not represent the man*

*I said the Founders would return  
And they are here right now  
Heirs of the four are here like you  
To grow and learn and chow*

*So Founders – go to your houses!  
Now everyone – be a sport,  
Perhaps into new houses I will sort!*

Professor Sprout looked up at the hat, her mouth open. The room was deadly quiet. A murmuring hum was heard, then voices could be picked out – ‘you’re kidding’ and ‘whaaat?’

Harry looked at his friends, who shrugged and the four of them stood up together. The room fell silent once again, as students stared at the four with mixtures of disgust, awe, and expectancy.

“Come on” the hat quipped. To your proper houses. Harry stepped over the long bench and stood at the head of the Gryffindor table, as Hermione made her way to Slytherin, Neville to Hufflepuff and Luna went to the head of her own.

A few bold, or foolish, students started to cat call. “Come on, Potter! Who do you think you are?” and “She can’t be a Slytherin!”, and so on. Harry sent a mental message to his friends, and in unison they thrust their empty hands into the air, and instantly had the weapons of the Founders in them. Fawkes also appeared, trilled a song of soothing and landed on Harry’s shoulder. All arguments ceased immediately, as the school students as a whole could not argue with the gleaming swords and shield of the founders held in their hands.

*“Why do they not believe us, Harry?”* Hermione sent him telepathically.

*“Because they didn’t see us fight, love.”* Harry answered.

Professor Sprout looked at her list of first years, and wasn't surprised to see it had been expanded to include all the student's names. The sorting would now begin and be honest for the first time in decades.

It did take a bit longer, but finally all the students were sorted. Most were in their old houses, but there were quite a few surprises, and Slytherin was no longer lacking in students – the houses were once again equal in size.

Thomas Dean, Ginny Weasley, and Parvarti ended up Slytherin. The Creevy brothers turned into Hufflepuffs. There were too many changes to take in immediately.

Headmistress McGonagall eyed the stirring crowd with a smile. "Settle down – the quicker we get this done, the sooner we eat." The room hushed instantly. "All returning students are probably in shock right now. We have never had a resorting of houses like this in the history of Hogwarts, but it was necessary. We have just come through dark times, and Tom Riddle influenced way more than we would like to admit. The hat was persuaded to place many of you in the incorrect house for your personality. Please understand the original intent of the houses was to help students to form friendships, not to end up in rivalry. Most importantly, Salazar Slytherin was not an evil or dark wizard. His house should never represent darkness – this is a school of light."

She took a deep breath and looked around at the students, who were giving their full attention. "The Founders have returned. I am headmistress until they graduate, and then I step back down to assistant headmistress. These four students you see at the head of each table have indeed been chosen and trained by the Founders themselves."

A belligerent Ravenclaw yelled out "how is that possible?"

"Mr. Owens, there is no need for rudeness" Minerva spoke stiffly. "They went back in time to train with the Founders. You were not at the battle as I was, and you have not seen the magic they are capable of." She paused briefly, and was satisfied to see the boy back down and stare at Luna in awe. "I expect all students to get along with every house. I demand fair play and good sportsmanship."

Don't let the sacrifices so many have made these past three years have been for nothing. Now, let us enjoy the feast, and I'll finish the announcements afterwards."

Harry and his friends sat down as McGonagall clapped her hands and the food appeared on the tables. The first years, new to this, oohed and aaahed, and Ron whimpered with delight. Everyone dug in.

*"How's it going at the snake table, dear?"* Harry sent to Hermione telepathically.

*"Far better than I expected! Everyone wants to hear about Salazar. Really, with Nott, Crabb, Malfoy, Parkinson and Goyle gone, those five were most of the bad blood in this house."* She sounded quite delighted.

When the last of the pudding and pumpkin juice was gone, the dishes disappeared and the Headmistress stood again. "I will keep this brief, as I know you are all tired" she smiled. "As our former groundskeeper, Reubius Hagrid, is now the Minister of Giants, Professor Grubbly-Plank has now returned to permanently fill that position." This was met with wild applause, especially from the girls. Although the Gryffindors loved Hagrid as a friend, he wasn't the best of teachers. Minerva continued.

"As I have become Headmistress, the transfiguration job has been filled by Professor Tonks-Lupin", and to Harry's delight, Tonks stood up and gave a quick grin and bow. "The position of Defense Against the Dark Arts has been filled by Professor Remus Lupin" who also gave a quick bow. Some of the applause was a touch nervous, but the accolades from students who had him before was quite wild.

"To replace Argus Filch, who died valiantly in the final battle, we now have a team of house-elves, who will be wearing these uniforms," and she nodded and a house-elf popped next to her, wearing a robe decorated in stripes of all the house colors. "They do have the authority to take house points and assign detention, so the former rules apply – no running in halls, no magic in halls, teacher's quarters are off-limits. Please consider potential consequences before you order anything from Weasley Wizarding Wheezes."

“And lastly, stay out of forbidden forest. Although it is true that there are no more werewolves or vampires in Britain, and the centaurs are no longer hostile, it still has more than it’s share of dangers and concerns. You may go to your houses now.”

Harry sent a mental good night to his friends, and helped to usher the new Gryffindors to the tower. He stood by the door making sure all the students had the new password, as several returning students were just resorted into the Red and Gold. He gave a polite nod to Blaise Zabini who was one of those. It would be a great year, Harry decided. Interesting but great.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o**

The year flew by. Without death threats and jealousies, Harry truly enjoyed his last year as a student. With everyone in their proper houses, and no more bullying from Death Eater wannabes, the students could all relax and get along. Madame Pomfrey’s job was much easier this term.

Hermione kept her promise to Marvin, and brought him a tank of healthy squid to choose from. He picked a plump female from the group (good thing too, as Hermione couldn’t tell the difference), and she transfigured it to a freshwater giant right in front of Marvin’s delighted eyes. The rest she had Winky pop back to the ocean. She spent many delightful hours visiting him and the merfolk, who gave concerts every weekend for any who wanted to hear.

Graduation came all too soon. This year, because of the Founders, the Great Hall was packed to the brim with reporters and anyone who was remotely related to a Hogwarts student. But Harry and his companions got through it and prepared for a triple wedding.

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The Quidditch Pitch was ready for the wedding of the century, festooned with a raised dais in the center, the goals removed and the ground and stands filled with garlands of white roses and lilies. The stands were filled to capacity with students, friends, reporters, well wishers and even a few relatives. Around the raised platform, in the special seats were all the people Harry, Hermione, Neville, Luna,

Dobby and Winky loved. Luna's dad and uncle, and even Father Christmas were there. There was Hagrid, the professors, all the Potter elves. Griphook and King Flailhide, Magorian and Firenze were present. The Lupins, the Grangers, Nevilles' Gran and parents, and the Dursleys were all there. All the Weasleys were in the special seats, and the portraits of his parents, Sirius and Aunt Joan were placed on flower festooned easels. Fawkes and Hedwig were on perches of honor, Gnomes and fairies flew and scampered around in wild abandon, and everyone was excited.

Harry gazed with glazed eyes at the huge crowd present for his marriage. He liked his robes though – formal black with red and gold piping on the edges. *“Gee – didn't we dream of a small wedding, my love?”* he sent to his bride privately.

Hermione giggled, looking down and smoothing an imaginary wrinkle from her dress. She was robed in flowing white satin, edged with green and silver piping, her hair swept up and held in place with a silver snake with emerald eyes – a gift from Harry that morning. *“Well, it was either let McGonagall, Molly and Bones have their way and just accept everyone wants to be part of this, or try to have a small one and stress about the hundreds that would crash.”*

Luna looked resplendent in her gown, matching Hermione's except for being piped in the Ravenclaw blue and bronze. Her hair was actually held in place by fairies, whom, if one was honest, actually came to blows over the honor. She smiled her dreamy far away smile at her husband-to-be, which was looking a tad nervous at the crowd. His formal robes were piped with the yellow and black of Hufflepuff, and he was more than a little uncomfortable in all the finery.

Dobby and Winky just about stole the show, though. It was now well-known that Dobby was one of the eight heroes that defeated Riddle, and people everywhere were treating house-elves with more respect (and some with a little well-deserved fear). The Chosen One had improved the house-elf's plight once again. Dobby had approach Harry a couple months back to ask permission to marry Winky, which Harry gladly gave if he would wait and join them in a triple ceremony. Dobby also had to think of his public now. The two happy elves were dressed in formal Potter-Black uniforms, at their own insistence.

Madame Bones performed the ceremony, and vows were exchanged between the three couples. The new husbands and wives left the dais to the hugs and kisses of their friends and family; while the crowd delightfully pelted them with rice, flowers, and anything else light weight they could throw. Fairies flew and zoomed, and the twins set off many of their best fireworks to date, although a couple of the ones that spelled out naughty words 'accidentally' found their way into the display.

"Gee, how did that happen, George?" Fred asked innocently with wide eyes.

"I just don't know, Fred" George answered, smugly watching the sparkly word 'poo' floating over the crowd.

## Chapter 37

### Crime & Punishment

Harry and Hermione spent a delightful summer of honeymoon bliss at Potter Manor, unpacking Godric's Suitcase after the elves' honeymoon, and finally settling in. Winky and Dobby honeymooned for a week (which they tried not to feel guilty for taking) in the magical trunk "because that's where we fell in love, kind masters", Winky explained. After their honeymoons the enchanted marble track was removed from the trunk and made to fit in the study, Hermione and Harry's favorite room.

Neville and Luna, to the delight of all, bought the Weasley's new home. The Weasleys were just too homesick for the Burrow, which was now safe, and they happily sold the large and formal manor to the delighted Longbottoms. Luna got her life long wish and they spent a delightful honeymoon at the North Pole, visiting Father Christmas' workshop.

Minerva McGonagall happily stepped down from the Headmistress position – she far preferred teaching to leadership. She filled a slot teaching occlumency, animagus transformation, apparition, theory, and other forms of magic that had fallen through the cracks over the decades. She intended to teach as long as she was capable, and that's what she did.

The companions set up the round office by de-cluttering all of Albus' old knick knacks (most of which were non-functional junk laid out to impress people), returning books to the library, private books and belongings to Alberforth, and sending his giant telescope to the astronomy tower where it belonged. They made a half circle of desks for the four of them where Albus' use to be, turned his private room into a private counseling room, and the loft where the telescope was into a relaxing lounge area. Each couple had private quarters down the hall. The weapons of the founders were placed in very secure cases in the office, but the Founders assured Lady Hogwarts if she wanted to simply hide them again for the future, she was welcomed to do so.

Besides a full set of 'Hogwarts: A History' on the shelves, in a place of honor sat Harry's absolutely favorite book ever – 'Signature Wizard Effects' by Gred and Forge Weasley. Harry had inspired them to write it, and the book was filled with how to make your eyes twinkle, teeth sparkle, robes billow and tons of other trademark looks. Harry was trying a new one out every week.

Soon after the Founders took their seats in the Headmaster's office, Madame Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt visited. Brushing the soot off their robes as she emerged from the fireplace, she smiled warmly at the four, and looked around the office pleased to note how neat and clean it looked. She was a very organized woman.

They gestured the two to sit in comfortable chairs, and Dobby proudly served tea and refreshments before popping away. "What can we do for you, Minister?" Harry politely asked.

"Well Harry, we still have close to 30 Death Eaters in stasis. We wanted your opinion what to do with them." She sat back and watched the foursome's faces.

"Hmmm" Harry fought back guilty feeling as he thought about Malfoy the Ottospam – his favorite, much abused, foot rest. "That is a good question. They aren't serving any kind of sentence or suffering punishment while in stasis. Do we know if they are alive – did the death mark kill them when Riddle fell?"

Kingsley cleared his throat. "We don't know for sure, but research indicates they should be fine."

"The four of you are extremely skilled Occlumens" Amelia stated. "If we revive them, you could determine if any of them were repentant at least."

Luna nodded and mused "it would be fair to release them and put them through a 'reintroduction class or something, to see how they react to current events."

"Yes" Hermione agreed, "but what *do* you do with them? Azkaban isn't much use without the dementors, and nobody misses those. Is

there a real jail now, or is the death sentence still used? Remember, most of the Death Eaters are murderers and violent criminals.”

“Azkaban has been revamped,” Amelia said. “It does have more humane conditions, aurors for guards, and is much more secure. But could you take their magic from them?” the minister asked hopefully. “Perhaps we could rehabilitate them if they were disarmed, so to speak.”

Neville and Harry shook their heads. “Magic is in you – in each cell, every fiber of your being.” Harry explained. “It’s just not possible.”

“Unless...” Luna pursed her lips in thought, “we could infect someone with permanent magic dyslexia...”

“Whoa” Hermione shared mind speak with her best friend, and they batted ideas back and forth. “It’s possible, but I would think a wizard so affected would become so embittered, they would either go insane or totally postal.”

“Postal?” Neville asked.

“Muggle saying” Harry and Hermione answered in unison.

“Let me check something for you, Minister,” Harry said and popped away, returning in a few moments with his portrait of Sirius Black. He set it down on a conjured easel.

“Minister, Kingsley, I spent a short time in the beyond during my sixth year when I briefly died. During that time, I brought back the soul of my godfather here, which resides in this painting.” Sirius nodded in agreement. “As you remember, he was murdered by being pushed through the veil by Bella Lestrage under the imperious curse by Albus.”

“Hey – you really didn’t need to bring that up, my boy” Dumbledore called down from his portrait in the office. Harry gave him tolerant and condescending smile.

“It keeps you humble, Albus. Goodness knows you need it.” Harry chuckled.

Amelia Bones shook her head. She understood the portraits of the headmasters, but to keep one of such a traitor was beyond her. It obviously amused the Founders though.

“Sirius?” Harry asked his godfather. “I never asked because I felt it must have been private, but we now need to know. What was beyond the veil when you were pushed through?”

The dark haired man winced, but started to speak. “Well, death was instant, if that’s what you are asking.”

“Can you tell us more, Mr. Black? We are considering it as punishment for the Death Eaters. We can’t keep them in stasis forever.” Amelia leaned forward, almost frightened of learning the answers.

Sirius smiled weakly. “It’s probably different for everyone. The veil led me to pitch black space – not a room. There is no floor, no air, no light, no movement – nothing. You are alone with yourself – your thoughts – for who knows how long. My life started replaying for me. I don’t know if it was done to me, or just my mind doing it out of boredom. Seeing all the mistakes I had ever made was not fun. When that was done I found myself in that paradise you found me in, Harry. I always got the impression I had been judged. I never met any Death Eaters or dark wizards in the place I call Paradise.”

“I think that might be your answer, Minister” Neville said. “It’s humane and painless. Who knows where the evil dead go, but at least is it a separate place from the good dead. I think as each Death Eater is brought back they need to be read by us or Professor Snape, and then guilty ones need to be executed.”

**00o0o0o0o0o**

The tins of Spam were brought from the Longbottom’s basement to the Ministry of Magic. Prisoners were restored four at a time, and taken to a class room to catch up with current events. Once they understood their circumstances, they were brought to private rooms where each individual was interviewed by an auror and one of the Founders in disguise (as Harry felt if most of them saw him or Hermione, they would freak out).

It took a little over a week, and it was painful and exhausting. The large majority of the Death Eaters were unrepentant murderers, who as soon as they felt there was some hope for pardon started to make mental plans to either resurrect Riddle or take his place in ruling the world.

Hermione was able to find one that was forced to take the Death Mark under the imperius curse and never wanted to do the horrors he was forced to do. He was sent for intense healing first at St. Mungos, and then with Luna for counseling.

There were a couple low-level Death Eaters, and a few younger ones, who had never murdered or tortured. They weren't exactly innocent, but the aurors chose to give them a jail sentence in the newly updated Azkaban to serve time and hopefully learn a lesson. In all, out of 31 Death Eaters, only six were spared the death sentence.

Harry himself had the dubious honor of interviewing Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy didn't recognize him in his Edward Evans persona, but Harry still felt terribly uncomfortable around the man. The slender blond was as arrogant and warped as the day he was canned.

"So what ever happened to my wife and son?" he sniffed disdainfully.

"Your wife died when Riddle did because of her death mark" Harry pretended to read it off a parchment, "and the whereabouts of your son are unknown."

"Oh" he said in his bored manner. Harry peered into his mind. *"Good thing I was in that can then – stupid Narcissa. Probably drank her self to death before the mark could take her out."* Harry was more than a little shocked over the total lack of concern over his wife and son. Draco never even entered Lucius' thoughts again.

"What ever happened to Severus Snape? You do know a Death Eater is teaching all those brats at Hogwarts, don't you?" Malfoy drawled in his annoying silky voice.

"He was a double agent, spying for the Order of the Phoenix the whole time. He had his death mark removed willingly months before

Riddle died and is living happily ever after” Harry replied. Lucius sniffed in disbelief.

“They told us the Dark Lord was vanquished. Did Potter end up doing it?” *“It doesn’t matter what this kid says – I will never believe a half-blood boy could kill the Dark Lord.”* Lucius wasn’t terribly bothered by the death of Riddle – he just wanted to know who was the most powerful.

“Yep” Harry answered smugly.

“How?” Lucius asked with the faintest of interest.

“He merged with a part-fairy, muggleborn, half-giant, goblin, house-elf, pureblood and centaur, turned into a dragon and roasted him with magical fire. It was quite spectacular.” Harry did get quite a thrill from telling the bigoted snob that. Although Malfoy showed nothing on his face, his insides were screaming with disbelief.

“I suppose the Dark Lord put up quite a fight, then” he drawled in a faintly hopeful voice.

Harry couldn’t stand it any more. It’s not right to torture prisoners, but this disgusting man was responsible for the death, rape, and torment of many with no regrets. He seriously thought he was superior by right of blood. “How about I show you” Harry smiled at him dangerously.

Before Lucius could say a thing, Harry was in his head, holding him captive. The Boy-Who-Lived revealed himself and replayed the final battle for Malfoy, showing him the quivering frightened Riddle on the ground, ignoring his troops and his loyal Death Eaters and crying in fear. Lucius saw his former house-elf, the mudblood Granger, and all manner of mix breeds and animals form together to take out the Dark Lord as easily as snuffing a candle.

When he had finished sharing in the final battle, Lucius Malfoy sat back weakly in his seat. Limp and defeated, he looked at Harry who transformed back into himself. There was nothing more to say – the veil waited for him.

## **Chapter 38**

### **What Ever Became Of...**

One to ten years later. Encyclopedias of happenings transpired in that time. But most of the events were charming and mundane – not the stuff of legends, heroes, or books. But it is never fair to end a story without visiting key peoples, here goes:

#### **O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Hagrid married Olympia soon after the war. Between a vat of vile-tasting Skelegrow and Fairy magic, Luna was able to re-grow his arm to his everlasting delight. (She had offered Mad-Eye Moody a new leg and eye, but he didn't trust her enough to take her up on it.).

It took the kind giant a long time to get over the loss of his half-brother, but with the help of Luna and Hermione, they laid Grawp to rest in the cemetery on Hogwarts grounds with other heroes of the war. Many could never understand the love he had for his rough and wild brother, but the two witches fully shared his love and loss.

Olympia and Hagrid had five kids, all of whom inherited giant-kind's original size, but their parent's intelligence and disposition. In a generation the giants did return to Europe, but not the violent beasts of yore, but kind and gentle wizard giants.

Hagrid remained with the Ministry for years. Olympia gradually and lovingly changed his dress and hygiene habits, and he turned out to be quite the figure at the many Ministry social gatherings. They settled in a large estate with very high ceilings, and although Hagrid never took to romping the forest with dragons again (at least more than a weekend at a time), strange pets would come home with him quite often.

#### **O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Ginny Weasley married Dean Thomas, and it turned out to be a brilliant match. Although she carried a torch for Harry for a time, her new placing in Slytherin helped both Ginny and Dean to understand themselves better, and she came to realize Harry really was too

dorky for her. She became a professional Quidditch player for Puddlemere United for a few years and Dean worked for the Daily Prophet. They had one child, a son they named Dean Jr.

Ron followed his dream and became a keeper for the Chudley Cannons. Eventually he rose to captain and actually led the team to many winning seasons. Harry and he stayed friends, although not extremely close. Close enough though, that every year as a joke Ron would send Harry a box of Honeydukes chocolates, the latest Cannon's poster, and a nice gift too.

He never entirely got over the shame of his piggish attitude toward Hermione while he was under Dumbledore's influence. As it happens so often, guilt kept him from repairing their former friendship, and he avoided her for the rest of his life. Ron ended up marrying Lavender Brown, who insisted on continuing to call him 'Won-Won', but despite that turned out to be a loving wife and nurturing mom. She gave embarrassing nicknames for all four of their children, too.

Percy Weasley did work his way up the ladder in the Ministry – by becoming an auror. Having taken his life lesson to heart, and proving his worth at the final battle, he trained hard and prospered. He married his childhood sweetheart Penelope Clearwater, and they had a tasteful 2.5 children. He never could break out of his love of rules and statistics.

Molly and Arthur settled gladly back in the Burrow. They expanded some of the rooms and kicked the ghoul in the attic out to a shed, but it stayed the same sweet home they had always loved.

They adopted a couple house elves, and Molly opened an orphanage for children left homeless from the war. With twenty children in the house, she was in her glory. Many were found perfect and happy homes, but they ended up adopting the final eight. Wizards do live very long lives, so why not start over.

Arthur stayed with his job in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, but Madame Bones appreciated the position and gave him a substantial raise. After all, with sons like Fred and George, he had plenty of job security.

## **O0o0o0o0o0o**

The twins became fabulously wealthy, opening stores all over Britain and hiring good witches and wizards to run them while they stayed in the background inventing newer, sneakier, funnier and better products all the time. They stayed just as close with Harry, Hermione and Marvin the Squid, and there was never a dull moment when they visited.

Their book, 'Signature Wizard Effects', was a top seller. Gilderoy Lockhart studied it faithfully, and started teaching seminars for them that were quite popular in the States, especially among Californian witches and wizards.

On a business trip to the States they met a pair of identical twin witches from New York. It was love at first prank – the blond haired firecrackers could dish it out just as hard as they could take it. They had probably the most dangerous double-wedding ceremony in the history of the world, but it was a day to remember. Harry supplied the fireworks.

## **O0o0o0o0o0o**

Severus Snape did not become a new man over night. In fact, he never became an entirely new man, if truth be told. He was still a touch greasy, snarky, and bat-like. He still had scathing wit and way too much impatience for a model teacher, but far gone were the days when he turned his back on dangerous Slytherin pranks or docked points from Gryffindor for breathing. Students got fair and good training from the man, and he was content to stay in the bond of Harry and stay at Hogwarts.

He managed to take his first vacation ever a year after the first battle where he met and married a potion's mistress. Thankfully they remained childless.

## **O0o0o0o0o0o**

With the poisonous influence of Dumbledore and Bain gone, the centaurs were far nicer to deal with. They appreciated the fact that Firenze was willing to stay around humans (for they never could

shake their pride and arrogance entirely), and they appreciated not being considered farm animals any more, with an equal say in government matters. Students who did sneak into the Forbidden Forest were now gently escorted back to the castle, and not by armed guard.

Respecting their wishes, Neville and the Founders never told anyone about the true nature of the Gnomes. They remained 'potatoes with legs' as far as the average wizard was concerned, but occasionally there would be a child who could see through the disguise, which amused the little people thoroughly. It was strange, but Sibyll Trelawney, with all her inner eye and talent, never noticed anything more than a garden pest.

The fairies were fairies – they haven't changed in centuries, and perhaps never will. They delighted in taking turns for the honor of staying with the Longbottoms, and most wizards never gave them more than a passing thought at Christmas time, which was the way it should be in their opinion.

Marvin the giant squid was delighted with his new wife, and vice versa. There is nothing a squid appreciates more than being removed from the food chain. He asked friend Hermione to name her, and after many books and much research, she named his bride Lavender. It was the tentacles that made up her mind. Marvin and Lavender never did have children, and Hermione never asked, but she suspected that even though the pair could live in fresh water, any egg cases they laid could not.

The merpeople' music became an overnight sensation. Musicians and connoisseurs from all over the world came to Hogwarts to listen to the weekend concerts in awe. The Merfolk were delighted to share, and more than a little shocked to find out just how crude and limited the original music they branched from really was.

With the new music came the schools of shark-like agents and lawyers, but Hermione swiftly put a stop to that. The merfolk's music remained their own, free and uncommercial, and truly a work of art.

**O0o0o0o0o0o**

Tonks and Remus stayed with Hogwarts, living at Grimmauld Place during the weekends and holidays. Remus swiftly recovered from the years under his curse, and was pleased to find he was a natural animagus (wolf, naturally), who enjoyed a run with Neville in the forest at any opportunity. He retained his heightened senses as well, and students never could pull a 'my kneezle ate my homework' on him. Wolves can smell fear you know.

Their two children also had heightened senses, were able to turn into wolves at will at an extraordinarily early age, and were metamorphagus like their mum. The auror's were already planning to snatch them up after graduation, and they hadn't even started at Hogwarts yet.

With the help of Sirius' portrait, and Sirius' mum's sanity (now proudly displayed in the open at Grimmauld Place), Remus got over the years of anguish he felt over being the last of the marauders, and he and his wife lived happy, sometimes giddy lives. Nodding and Blink, although elderly house-elves, remained very content and well-loved with the Lupins.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

There isn't a lot to say about the Dursleys. In cases as theirs, there is no 'happy ever after'. With years of counseling Petunia and Vernon worked out their guilt and anger, and did become a stronger and more united couple. However, they never completely got over their shame toward Harry. Harry did totally forgive them, and would visit on holidays and special occasions, but it was never an entirely warm fuzzy sort of thing.

Dudley was the most successful of the strange family. He turned his life around, and instead of shunning his cousin's world, would actually visit any time he could and ended up working for the twins in their Hogsmeade shop, living in the magical world. He married Eleanor Branstone, a quiet Hufflepuff from Harry's year, much to Petunia and Vernon's surprise. Dudley was highly prized by Fred and George for his good nature – they could test all sorts of muggle related things on him, and he would laugh it off and give valuable feedback.

The twins also discovered, to the magical worlds' shock, that every human possessed some degree of magic. By tweaking in a wand with magic magnifiers, Dudley was able to learn a few small spells, to his enormous delight.

Dudley and Eleanor had a happy marriage, and their two children turned out to be extremely powerful wizards. It was some recessive gene thing.

**OoOoOoOoOo**

After a year on the job, Harry and his friends decided they really couldn't keep Malfoy the Ottospam any longer. So Harry brought it to Neville, pouting how he would miss his favorite foot rest. Neville and Luna removed the garish trim and cushion and brought it to the Ministry, pretending to have just found it in a dark corner of their basement. The official that took the can gave Neville a strange look when he requested the empty can back, but gave it to him willingly when it was emptied.

Neville took the now-empty can home, cleaned it up and filled it with rocks, and the Longbottoms carefully replaced the cushion and trim. Harry's birthday was coming up, after all.

Draco blinked his eyes groggily after being restored, then sat up in panic, looking frantically for the angry Granger. He sat back on the bed he was laying on, staring in confusion at the medi-witch looking him over.

"You have just been brought out of stasis, Mr. Malfoy. How are you feeling?" she asked him briskly.

"Er, um – confused?" He ran his fingers through his mussed up blond hair. "How long was I gone? Where I am?" He eyed the elderly witch, weighing the possibility of flirting with her to work an escape or favors. The coldly professional look she gave him put an end to that contemplation.

"You have been in stasis close to two years, Mr. Malfoy. You are in the Ministry of Magic" she replied in a voice that didn't encourage questions.

“What now?” he asked, noticing the bars on the door frame for the first time.

“As soon as you feel up to it” she answered, handing him a cup of tea and setting a tray with a light lunch down on the small table next to the austere bed, “you will be caught up on current events. After that you will be evaluated to determine your future.”

With that the witch left him, relocking the cell and leaving him alone with his thoughts. Two years? He should have graduated by now, and instead the heir of Malfoy was going to have to take classes with the younger students like a squib, or buy his degree. Where was the Dark Lord now? He glanced around the room, turned his back to the door and rolled up his sleeve. The dark mark was gone – in his place a large, thick scab where it had been. Draco idly picked at it while musing to himself. It must mean that Potter won and the Dark Lord was dead. What about the Malfoy fortune? What about his parents and his home?

Draco finished the meal, stood up and stretched. He walked stiffly to the door and peered out. A guard was standing next to his cell looked over at him with bored indifference. The attitude grated on Malfoy’s nerves – he was not a boy who was use to being ignored or talked down to. He would be complaining to father.

“Are you ready for class?” the guard asked him, and Draco nodded yes, while discreetly searching his robes for any trace of his wand or magical items. Naturally he had already been searched and relieved of any usable goodies.

The guard opened the door and led him down the hall. There he was escorted into a small room with a table, penseive, copies of The Daily Prophet, and a middle-aged wizard who looked at him with a kind enough expression.

“I’m Dedalus Diggle” the wizard politely introduced himself. “It’s my job to catch you up on what has happened in the world since your containment, and answer any question you might have.”

Whew – where to begin. “OK, what ever happened to the mudblood that put me in stasis? Granger?” Malfoy felt sure she must have

broken some law somewhere. He conveniently ignored the fact he had attacked Potter and perhaps even killed him.

“Do you mean Hermione Granger? I was not given any details about your arrest or incarceration. She is now Lady Potter-Black, one of the eight heroes of the war.” The wizard answered with a faint trace of amusement. It was going to be fun to knock this arrogant kid down a peg. Mudblood indeed.

“She married Potter? He’s a Lord now?” Malfoy sputtered angrily. There was just no justice in the world, he felt. “And what about the Dark Lord?” he spat in frustration.

“Dead. Defeated on August 14th, 1998 by Lord Harry Potter-Black and the seven heroes of the war.” Diggle pushed the penseive closer to Draco, and spilled a tiny crystal bottle into it. “Have you ever used a penseive?” he asked him.

“Of course” Draco arrogantly sniffed. “My family *is* well off.”

“Then take a look – it’s a collection of memories from the final battle that we’ve collected.” This was going to be good – this kid really needed to be humbled.

Malfoy leaned over the basin and entered. Most of the memories centered on Potter and Riddle – that was where most people’s attention was drawn during the fight. What Draco saw amazed and chilled him at the same time. No longer a small skinny kid, Potter had grown into a strong man with warrior skills and magic like Draco had never seen – not even from the Dark Lord. He fired off spells two handed, wandless, and with sword with equal skill and accuracy. Just as powerful seemed to be the people at his side – Granger, Lovegood, and could that huge bear of a bearded man be Longbottom? What had happened to the four of them in a years’ time?

With awe and even a touch of admiration, despite himself, Draco watched Harry merge with a goblin, centaur, his old house-elf (Dudley, Doody? What was that elf’s name?), a phoenix, and that idiot Hagrid, who was missing an arm. Recently, too, if the state of his tunic was any hint. Then Harry actually merged with his friends and turned into

a blinding white dragon, which immediately killed Riddle with out breaking a sweat.

Voldemort was a total fool, Draco concluded. The Dark Lord cried, whimpered, and was in an obvious state of fear and panic. The Dark Lord never once concerned himself with his followers. Draco could easily see he had bonded himself on to one sick puppy.

Malfoy backed out of the penseive, sweating and worried now. "So what happened after?" he asked weakly.

Diggie smiled – it was nice to see the brat groveling a bit. "Everyone with the death mark that wasn't in stasis died on the spot when Riddle snuffed it. The dark mark formed a life link with him." Draco paled at this. "Madame Bones and the Wizengamot set up a new government jointly run by wizard, centaur, giant, goblin and elf." Draco now felt sick. "Lord Potter-Black, Lady Potter-Black, Lord and Lady Longbottom had been named heirs by the Founders of Hogwarts, and took over as headmasters after their graduation." Draco was turning green.

"Potter, Granger, Longbottom and Loony Lovegood were heirs?" Malfoy cried out in denial. "Who was the heir of Slytherin?"

"Oh, Lady Hermione Potter-Black" Diggie smirked at the nauseated boy.

Draco vomited in a swiftly conjured bucket.

Once he composed himself, he asked about Dumbledore, and was shocked to hear he had died of a heart attack right before the battle. After shaking his head a bit, he ran down a list of his friends and associates. Crabb and Goyle dead under their beds from the dark mark. Bella squished by the giant squid. Snape was a double-agent, had his dark mark removed, and still taught at Hogwarts. Nott was dead in battle. Zambini became a Gryffindor and was living a successful life.

It was then Draco realized he had not asked about his parents. With a shudder, he asked what happened to his father. It came as no surprise to learn his father has been found guilty and sentenced to

death through the veil. The senior Malfoy had been dead over a year now. With a deep shuddering breath he asked about his mum.

Diggie looked at him with his first feeling of pity. The kid did have a heart somewhere under all that prejudice and snobbery. "I'm sorry, lad. She was home when Riddle died, and the dark mark took her."

"My home?" Draco asked weakly.

"It has been locked and guarded by the Ministry until we could determine your whereabouts" Diggie answered gently. "Your can was lost for a while and just surfaced."

Draco was led back to his cell to digest everything he had learned. He had lived his life as a model Malfoy, despising the weak and impure, and doing whatever necessary to get his means accomplished. And what had it gotten him? Here he sat in a jail cell, awaiting sentencing, knowing full well that it was a thousand times more humane and comfortable than what the Dark Lord would give prisoners. He sat with his back against the wall, feet curled up, on his bed and a lone tear escaped his eye.

It was all so fun at Hogwarts – terrorizing mudbloods and Potter, ruling Slytherin with an iron fist. Mum and Dad would buy him out of any consequences his actions brought, and they had Dumbledore firmly in their pocket, thanks to liberal sprinklings of galleons. And what *had* it got him? He felt like torturing himself, so he was brutally honest. It got him nowhere. If he was found innocent, which wouldn't happen, all his friends and family were gone except for cousin Tonks who married that pauper werewolf Lupin. If he was found guilty, he could look forward to years in Azkaban or worse, the veil. He could just hear Potter laughing at him now.

But Harry didn't laugh. He came to visit him a couple hours later and sat down next to him in his cell. "Did you come to gloat, Potter? You won – the world loves you. You are rich, famous, adored by millions. So what do you want?" Draco glared at him and turned his face to the wall.

Harry sighed sadly. "Malfoy; shut up and listen for at least once in your life. You are now reaping the benefits of your parents and

Dumbledore never holding you accountable for your actions. Albus never pressed charges or made an official statement about your attempted murder of myself, and neither did I.” Draco snapped his head around and faced Harry. “The next step is to have you make an official statement to an auror and an Occlumens. There are only five who are able to perform occlumency to the skill level needed for a trial – myself, Hermione, Luna, Neville or Severus. Personally, none of us want to see you put to death. You are too young and never had your butt spanked as a kid. I need you to choose who you want to sit at your statement.”

Draco gaped at him. “Why?” he demanded. “Why are you being nice?”

“Malfoy” Harry said softly, “I had a lousy childhood. I was beaten, abused, and almost killed by my muggle relatives on several occasions. I had no idea magic even existed until a month before my first year at Hogwarts – the day before we first met at Malkins.” Draco stared at him in mute shock. The Boy-Who-Lived abused as a kid?

Harry nodded sadly. “I got a new chance at life when Hagrid came and got me. But my life at Hogwarts mostly sucked, except it was better than being punched, hit, and thrown around like I had been. Dumbledore, however, kept me in constant danger. He was pulling the strings in the background to keep me with my relatives, steal money from me, and keep me untrained to keep his ego inflated. I had to take control of my own life, my own training, and break out of the sludge that life had thrown at me.” Draco nodded, in spite of himself.

“Your parents didn’t do you any favors either, Malfoy. They let you grow up arrogant and thinking you was superior. They never made you earn the marks you got in school. They kept you weak and untrained.” Harry sighed. “I think we have a plan that would let you pay your debt to society, and help you in the process.”

“I’m listening” Draco answered, and this time without a sneer.

**O0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Draco chose to let Harry listen in on the statement. Harry wasn't surprised to find just how pampered and sheltered the Malfoy heir was. But deep down, if given a chance, there was a seed of sensitivity deep in the boy's soul. Harry felt it could be nurtured.

Malfoy was willingly afflicted with Magical Dyslexia by Luna. For two years if he tried to perform magic, it would come out backwards, and since he couldn't own a wand for two years, it didn't matter. He returned to Malfoy manor, alone, and was allowed house elves with monthly checks to insure their fair treatment.

It was tough at first, and the Malfoy heir was more than a little resentful. Anyone who knew him before shunned him. Needless to say Pansy, his betrothed, gave up on him long ago. He spent long hours counseling with Luna and Snape, and started to do charity work, helping Mrs. Weasley with the orphans, and helping to rebuild war-torn areas of the magic world. Seeing first-hand the devastation caused by Riddle truly turned him around.

Two years is a long time in the life of a young man, and these two years were good. The time broke Draco and built him back up, in to a more sensitive, self-motivated and moral person. He did find a wife, and a mix-blood at that, he got his magic and his wand back, and he raised two kids that never heard the word 'mudblood' until they left home for Hogwarts.

He never could understand why the mere sight of pink-beaded fringe would immediately break him out in hives. He suffered from the curious affliction the rest of his life.

**00o0o0o0o0o0o0o**

Last in this chapter we say goodbye to Griphook of the Goblins. Although getting on in years, he has many more decades ahead of him. Harry and he grew closer and closer, father and son, until Griphook was invited to build a house on the Potter Manor grounds (Goblins *hate* to live with relatives). He worked for eight years as the Minister to the Goblins, before stepping down for a younger member to fill the position.

King Flailhide came to visit the Potter-Blacks often, enjoying sharing rousing stories of wars gone by and fantasized wars to come. Goblins no longer sneered at Gringotts' customers with glittering eyes and sharp teeth, but enjoyed a renaissance of friendship and mutual respect with humans. Harry and Hermione were the first Wizards to visit the underground Goblin tunnels and lands in centuries, and visited often.

Griphook eventually married a well-to-do goblin widow who wasn't put off at living above ground (she was quite adventurous, truth be told), and moved in with her two strapping boys. The deer and wildlife population surrounding Potter Manor took years to recover.

## Chapter 39

### Final Goodbyes

It was a sunny Saturday and Harry was in the study at Potter Manor, working on answering a letter from a concerned parent. Neville and Luna were on weekend duty at Hogwarts (they alternated to make sure there was always a headmaster or headmistress on the grounds), and Hermione was playing wizard chess with Griphook. It was early October, and leaves were blowing outside and scratching against the windows.

"Harry, could you come here?" He looked up to see his mother calling him from her canvas. After moving to Potter Manor Harry had removed all the painting in the study and replaced them with his folks, Sirius, Aunt Joan, Potter Manor and Godric's Hollow, and his grandparents. He smiled at her and walked over.

His mum and dad were sharing a canvas, holding each other, and Sirius and Aunt Joan were doing the same. "Darling, it's time for us to go back." Lily said softly, tears shining in her eyes.

"Back?" Harry cried out in bewilderment. He stared at the four of them. "But I thought you would, I mean, I didn't know..."

"We didn't know either, son" his father spoke sadly. "Not to sound cliché, but our work here is done. We were given a special gift of spending time with you, but it's time for us to return."

"Don't fret, cub" Sirius smiled, an arm draped over Aunt Joan's shoulder. "You will still have our wizard portraits; it's just that our souls need to go back where they belong."

Aunt Joan smiled, her face radiant and expectant. "I've spent too long on earth. I know now that I was waiting for Sirius. I'm ready to go."

James looked over Harry's shoulder at the Goblin and daughter-in-law who were sitting with stunned expressions on their faces. "Thank you, Griphook, for being a father to Harry, and giving him the training I couldn't."

Lily joined in “and thank you for giving him the hugs we can’t. Hermione – thank you for everything – for Godric’s Hollow, for being the perfect wife for my son.”

Tears were flowing freely now. “Mum, Dad, Sirius – I’ll miss you! I, I don’t want you to go.” He grabbed the edges of his parent’s frame, as if he could stop what was happening.

“We love you Harry. We will see you again in the future.” The three portraits blew kisses while Aunt Joan waved gratefully. Then the figures walked back to their proper frames, and stopped moving for a moment. Harry jerked his head back and forth in panic, while Hermione and Griphook came and held his hands.

The figures vibrated slightly, and then moved again as normal. But *they* were gone – the souls of his parents and god father. The portraits still moved and spoke, but they were never quite the same. Harry missed them deeply, but he didn’t mourn too much. He knew they were all right.

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The Founders had been in office about a month when they decided to visit Moaning Myrtle one night after curfew. Harry felt a bit guilty for not visiting very often, as she had been a huge help to him in his 2nd and 4th years.

They walked into the girl’s bathroom, after checking with Hogwarts to make sure it was empty, and locked the door behind them. “Myrtle, are you here?” Hermione called out.

The ghost of the weepy girl flew out from her favorite stall. “What do you want? She asked in her most annoying manner. She spied Harry in the group and changed her attitude immediately. “Oh, it’s you Harry!”

“We just wanted to visit” Harry laughed. “I always said I would, but never had time. Now that I’m headmaster, I’ll make time!”

“You are headmaster now?” Myrtle gushed.

“Actually we all are – a founder thing you see.” Harry chuckled. He and his friends sat down on conjured chairs and Dobby popped in with tea.

“You mean you don’t want anything from me?” she said suspiciously.

“Not a thing” Luna shook her blond head, “except to get to know you better.”

Myrtle sniffed and sobbed, genuinely touched. “Nobody has ever come here to talk to me before, unless they wanted something. Or to tease me.”

“Myrtle, I need to properly thank you for your help in the past” Harry smiled at the ghost who was wiping her glasses on her translucent robes. “You really were a lifesaver with the chamber of secrets and the mermaid puzzle.” She sniffed and smiled a genuine smile back at Harry. “If it’s any kind of help, Tom Riddle, the boy responsible for your demise, is dead now.”

“Really?” Her eyes grew large, and she spun around glaring into the corner of the bathroom. “And why didn’t you tell me that?” she yelled at an unknown figure.

To everyone’s shock the ghost of Albus Dumbledore was sitting on a sink in a dark corner of the room. The ghost shrugged and said dryly “I was enjoying your company.”

“What are you doing here, sir?” Hermione asked with a great deal less respect than she used to show in her voice.

The ghost of Albus floated nearer. “It appears I have been tied to this bathroom for a while – presumably to atone for the death of Miss Henderson here. It was, after all, my fault that young Mr. Riddle got away with so much during his time at Hogwarts.”

It would be hard to say who was more shocked – Myrtle or the founders. Myrtle spun around a few times and chortled “then I’m free – free to either haunt as I wish, when I wish, or free to go beyond!”

“What will you do, Myrtle?” Neville asked her, brimming with curiosity.

The ghost smiled at him. "I think I'll visit every room in the castle that doesn't have plumbing, say goodbye to the other ghosts, and then I'll come and bid you four fare well. This might take a few days." And with a giggle, she floated through the closest wall.

Harry eyed Dumbledore over. "Well, Albus. Are you tied to this bathroom now?"

"No, Harry my boy. We can go to my, er, your office to chat if that's more comfortable." The ghost Albus' eyes still twinkled, even in the afterlife. Harry swiftly charmed his own to do the same, and stood up. "Fine – back to the office – I do have some questions for you."

The four made their chairs disappear and popped back to the office. Sitting in their lounge area where the telescope use to be, they watched Albus' ghost float up through the floor, and Hermione giggled as the former headmaster received a fat wet raspberry from several of the portraits including his own. Fawkes, who had just settled on Harry's shoulder, turned his back pointedly to the ghost.

The ghost chuckled dryly. "I deserve all that and more, I'm afraid. I can't say I like what you did to the office, my boy. Where's my telescope?"

Harry twinkled his own eyes at him. "I gave it to the astronomy tower, Albus. It was purchased by a rich alumnus for the school, not for you personally I found out. The library has all its books back, and your personal books and stuff we sent to Alberforth."

Dumbledore nodded, twinkling back. Hermione interrupted. "Tell me sir, what is it like being a ghost."

"Hmmm" Albus pondered, floating comfortably in front of them. "Brutally honest. You can't help but be honest in all your answers and dealings. With no flesh and blood there is no deceit for some strange reason." Harry recalled every conversation he had with ghosts over the years and decided it must be true. "And I must say how nice it is not to have joint pains all the time. I do, however, miss my muggle sweets."

“How long have you been back?” Neville asked with curiosity, and more than a touch of distrust.

“A couple days” the ghost answered simply. “I think I’m back to make what amends I can, but perhaps not. I really don’t know yet.” He glanced over at Fawkes. “I’m really sorry, Fawkes. I never knew what you were. You tried to tell me over and over. I wish you would at least look at me.” There was simple heart felt sadness in his voice, and the phoenix did turn about and face his former companion with a pearly tear in his eye.

With a deep shuddering breath the ghost looked up from his misty lap and faced the founders. “All right then, fire away. What questions do you have for me?”

“OK, Albus” Harry broke right in. “Why me? What was the deal? What is the true story of the Boy-Who-Lived from your perspective?”

“Harry, there isn’t one of you I haven’t wronged, but your wounds are the deepest. In my defense, I did start out as a good person, and started using the philosopher’s stone for good and pure reasons, but it quickly warped me. It was many, many uses of it before I lost complete control, but up to that point I could have backed out and died with my dignity intact.” Albus sighed and gave Harry and Neville a sorrowful look. “Anyway, I did give you a partial truth – Sybill did give me a true prophecy during her job interview, but it was not overheard by anyone.” Mimicking Trelawney with amusing accuracy, he repeated the prophecy told to him by the goblins:

One who comes is evil incarnate  
He seeks to destroy all that is not wizard pure  
He marks the child  
Who’s parents thrice defied him  
The child born when summer’s moon is waning.

The child will grow alone, unknown  
Betrayed by one the wizards love  
When he comes into his own  
And learns of his betrayal  
He will start his true path of learning

*The child yet not-a-child will learn*  
*The king of his time is corrupt*  
*The king will work against him*  
*And then will rise against him*  
*But will not win.*

*The boy will learn the ways of the goblins*  
*The ways of the elves,*  
*And the ways of the wizards.*  
*He will have power the Dark Lord knows not.*

*The young man will find*  
*Three close friends*  
*They cannot be parted.*  
*They were together at the founding of the school.*  
*The young man will find*  
*Four not-of-the wizards.*  
*They will unite the magical worlds once more*  
*They will defeat evil, betrayer and king*  
*And peace will rule at last.*

“We know it, Albus. The Goblins gave it to me a couple years back.”  
 Harry looked at him pointedly. “Why the false prophecy?”

Dumbledore was taken aback. “How did they learn it?” He asked, stunned.

“They have seers too, Albus.” Harry answered a touch smugly.

“Right then, “Albus shook his ghostly head. I created the false prophecy as a diversion, and put Sybill under an imperious to quote it back to me; and obliviated her afterwards. I wanted to be the hero again – I missed the fame and accolades, I’m ashamed to say. In my pride I refused to believe that a half-blood squirt” he nodded at Harry, “or a chubby mama’s boy,” he nodded at Neville, “could possibly save the world like I had against Grindelwald. I had convinced myself that only I could do the job.”

“So by leaking a false prophecy you basically forced Riddle to mark Harry, and put the wheels of the true prophecy in motion” Luna mused.

“Yes, but I had also hoped, in my stone-distorted ego, to force Riddle to kill the two boys at some point, leaving the job of defending the world to myself.” Albus stared at his misty lap in guilt and misery. “When that wasn’t working, I let Hogwarts start to slide in academic excellence, knowing if Harry and Neville made it this far, they wouldn’t be much of a match for Riddle. I made sure Neville wasn’t matched with a proper wand or proper house, and picked on by relatives and classmates, and I ensured that Harry would be kept in the dark about the magic world and abused.” He paused and they could see ghostly silver tears trickling down his cheeks. “I am not proud of what I did.”

“Why did you take so much money from my parent’s vault?” Harry asked, shaking with sorrow. “You do know I got it all back the week before the final battle, don’t you?”

“I don’t know why, Harry. I think it was just a childish thing – I did it because I could. I didn’t need the money. I was furious when I found it was paid back to your account, but a bit relieved too.” Albus truly looked miserable.

“You let Voldemort’s true identity remain a secret all this time to discredit Harry and make sure you became the hero?” Hermione asked in stunned disbelief. “Why didn’t you stop Harry from competing in the Tri-Wizard tournament? You had to have known that Crouch was Moody!”

“I did” the ghost confessed simply. “I also knew he was working hard to ensure Harry won. I wanted Riddle brought back to a body because I had no idea how to defeat him as a spirit. I used Harry for that reason.”

The Founders were shaking their heads in disbelief. This was a lot to swallow.

“How did you ever get my father’s cloak?” Harry asked with curiosity.

“The night your parents died I took it from their home, after dropping you off at the Dursley’s. Sirius was searching for Peter, and the home was deserted. I was poking around hoping to find it – it’s a very rare and useful thing.”

“Then why give it back to Harry?” Neville asked with a frown. He was getting quite angry – he didn’t mind being put at risk all those years as much as he really resented what Dumbledore had put Harry through.

“Simple. I had obtained one of my own by then, and thought it was a great way to put you in danger – allowing you to run around the castle at night.” Albus looked more and more sorrowful by the second.

“So you used your own invisibility cloak to sneak up on me when I was at the mirror of Erised?” Harry asked in shock.

“Harry, you have no idea, but when I stood there and watched you gazing at nothing in the mirror more than your family, I almost confessed and repented that night.” Albus sighed again. “But the poison was too deep in me by then, and my terrible pride won out.”

“What about Sirius? I know it was really you that murdered him. Why?” Harry shook with emotion, recalling the agony of that summer when he blamed himself.

“Sirius knew, Harry. He never totally trusted me, even as a student. He started keeping too close of an eye on me, and started to convince his friends to question my doings. I had to obliviate people left and right to stay ‘blameless’ in their eyes. I saw an opportunity at the Ministry of Magic, and I took it.”

After a pause Hermione spoke up. “OK, Albus, why? We’ve heard all kinds of motives – the Minister’s job, fame, wealth – you tell us.” She looked confused and hurt.

“Motives are rarely straight forward or easy to understand – by the individual or others. My primary motive was the power from Hogwarts. As you know the castle feeds the headmaster or masters with amazing amounts of raw magical energy on demand. I could never have defeated Grindewald if it wasn’t for being as close to Hogwarts as I was. Like dark magic, even light magic in large enough doses can be addicting.” Albus looked at them sadly, letting them digest his answer for a moment.

“Also” he continued, “the philosopher’s stone is dark magic to some degree. Nicolas Flamel seemed to immune to its negative aspects – possibly because he made it. I, on the other hand, found myself warped by it more and more as the years went by. Under its influence I found myself craving the fame and accolades of the people, and looking down on the weaker not unlike Tom Riddle in many ways. I never wanted Fudge’s job, never needed the money I stole.”

The former headmaster took a deep shuddering breath. “Harry, I have no right to ask you to forgive me. My crimes are too severe and too many. But I still will ask because I must – I know you have every right to refuse.” Tears were streaming down the ghost’s face, repentance billowing off the ghost in waves.

Harry gazed at the specter for a long time, his chin cupped in his hands as he leaned on his desk. His three friends and Fawkes all watched silently, each pondering how they would handle the situation themselves. Finally he looked at Albus and spoke.

“Albus, I forgive you. Not so much for your sake, but for my own. If I don’t take his opportunity to do so, it would allow bitterness to poison me the rest of my life. You took a lot from me – trust, innocence and a childhood. I refuse to let you take anything else, so I forgive you, thereby freeing myself.” The expression on Harry’s face was both stony and resolved.

With that Dumbledore collapsed into a fetal-like ball, howling in relief and misery. When the ghost had cried himself out, the founders found there wasn’t more to say. They thanked Albus for his honesty, and found where the philosopher’s stone was hidden, and did destroy it for once and all. Nicolas Flamel had passed on several years back, thinking that Dumbledore had already disposed of it. Albus came and went around the grounds and castle, apologizing to all who would hear him out. And when the last person was confessed to, he said his good byes to the Founders and went beyond, arm and arm with Not-Moaning-Anymore Myrtle.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom naturally returned to Longbottom Manor from St. Mungos. They had discussed living with Neville and Luna

after the wedding, but quickly decided that was too much of a strain on a new marriage. They developed a close relationship with their son and his odd yet enchanting wife, but it didn't happen overnight. There was years of catching up to do, the terrible wish to nurture and be nurtured, and a stubborn unconscious refusal to understand their little baby was a man. They all ended up learning if you pour enough love on it, the fire of contention will go out.

Neville's Gran, the matriarch of the Longbottoms, lived long enough to see her 'almost a squib' grandson grow into a powerful yet humble man, be knighted and named heir by Helga Hufflepuff herself. She lived long enough to see the final defeat of Riddle, and she lived long enough to have her son and daughter-in-law returned to their senses and come home. But she didn't live long after that. Within the year, on a fine spring morning, her beloved house-elf found Mrs. Longbottom still in bed, her sightless face turned toward the window and a peaceful smile on her face. Her family mourned the passing of Gran, but celebrated her life and accomplishments, as we all must do when we lose one dear to us.

Neville, Luna, countless fairies and a green house full of exotic plants moved to the Weasley's former home, and named it Huffleclaw Manor. They loved teaching and staying at Hogwarts almost as much as they loved each other. Neville took many weekend jobs on the side doing hero work – the aurors valued his strength and power, and women and children in distress adored his humble and gentle nature. Luna didn't mind sharing him in the least – heroes are in high demand but short supply.

Luna bore her bearded husband two boys and then triplet girls. Neville's sons, Harry and Remus, were tall, strapping, brave and strong like their father. The girls seemed to have throwback genes to Luna's ancestry, because they had the solid black eyes of the fairy, the strange habit of glowing visible colored auras when feeling strong emotion, and their mother's outer-worldly dreaminess. They had daddy wrapped around all 30 of their fingers.

The calm and strange Mrs. Luna Longbottom contentedly stayed with her children until they were of age for Hogwarts, and then threw herself back into the school with renewed passion, teaching healing

for the first time in centuries at the castle, and pulling numerous pranks on the deserving. The best part was nobody ever suspected her.

## **OoOoOoOoOoOo**

The Potter elves, as all of Harry's elves loved to call themselves, were probably the happiest elves in the UK. Tippy stayed with his daughter Cookie, who found a wonderful husband after the war. They kept Potter Manor spotless, and were visited often by the kind Master Potter-Black and his gracious wife. Many people visited throughout the year to see the birth place of The Chosen One, and Cookie always gave them the grand tour with pride.

Icy, Kiki, and Lolly, the former Malfoy elves rescued with Cookie from Narcissa, wore their Potter-Black uniforms with fierce pride. They all found spouses and Harry built them their own homes on the Manor grounds – a first for house-elves. They had many children, and ended up being able to care for the manor and grounds without outside help from the elf network. The rest of the Elvin world was not happy about that, and occasionally a bored elf would show up and insist on helping anyway, so it all worked out. Icy even enjoyed being the Minister to the Elves. It wasn't so demanding of a job that he couldn't help Winky with polishing the floors or silver at the end of the day, after all.

Dobby and Winky, happily married, ended up turning Godric's Suitcase into a private apartment and keeping it in the laundry room next to the master's chambers. Harry couldn't convince them otherwise. Dobby had restored his reputation from being a 'pervert' when he saved Harry Potter's life over the wishes of his masters, the Malfoys. He wore his house uniform with pride and honor,

Winky did most of the meal planning and was Harry and Hermione's constant companion. The master trusted her over everyone and everything to deliver letters, and tend to his personal needs. She took a short time away to have twin babies, a boy and girl elf which they proudly named Grangy and Padfoot, and then went right back to work, following her beloved masters between Hogwarts and Potter Manor, children in tow.

Dobby and Winky still had mock fights as to who was the happiest elf in the world, much to the other elves' amusement. Everyone one knew *all* the Potter elves were so.

**OoOoOoOoOoOoOo**

And what about our main characters, Harry and Hermione? Happily ever after is a strange cliché – it seems to hint that there was never a temper or cross word, which is silly. Of course they had the occasional spat, but they always made up. And naturally their hearts were occasionally broken by the randomness of life. Ten years after the war saw many changes in our couple, but their love and commitment to each other remained firm. Harry and his friends brought Hogwarts out of its slump of mediocrity, and Harry finally outgrew the majority of his childhood traumas. He was mature, confident, and balanced.

Power such as his was a valuable commodity, so Harry, like Neville, was in constant demand for special tasks, which he undertook willingly the first few years. He especially loved to teach advanced magic to gifted students, and formed several clubs at Hogwarts to promote dueling, defense, and the like. The only subject he would never teach or even discuss was animagus training. It still galled him after all those years to have the animagus form of a robin, but he did secretly love to fly with Hedwig and Fawkes when no one was looking.

Hermione re-vamped the Muggle Studies for Hogwarts, taking it over for a time herself. She insisted that when she wasn't teaching it, the professor had to be at least muggle raised, otherwise it was silly. She started the practice of field trips to muggle movie theatres and restaurants, much to the delight of Hogwarts students.

However, Hermione had also discovered she had a huge talent during their time in Godric's Suitcase. She was quite the artist, and studied for a time under a wizard master. She then brought the skills to make the wizard portraits back to Hogwarts, and introduced art classes to the curriculum. When not involved with her family or Hogwarts, she was in constant demand as a painter.

Harry and Hermione had three children, all very powerful. They named the eldest son Godric Gryphook, their second child, a daughter,

Rose Emma, and the last, another boy, Salazar Daniel. They were not extraordinarily handsome, nor unnaturally well-behaved (especially when around their 'uncles' Fred and George), but were typical children. And Harry couldn't have been more pleased.

Five years after the final battle Amelia Bones retired as the Minister of Magic. After much clamor from the public and begging from Ms. Bones and friends, Harry agreed to run, and was voted in by a landslide. He turned out to have far more patience for politics than he would have thought possible, and even got use to reporters. He was fair, just, and well-loved. He still spent a couple days each month at Hogwarts, as he was a founder, and because he simply loved to teach.

Fawkes lived contentedly with Harry. It took him a long time to get over Albus' slide into dark dealings, but get over he did. It was great, in his opinion, to have a wizard who was able to speak with him, appreciated him, and wasn't stuck on himself. When Harry's time on earth came, Fawkes would have to find another bond, but he wouldn't worry about it for many, many happy years.

**OoOoOoOoOoOo**

Tippy finished dictating the final paragraph. Cookie had just glanced around the corner to check on him, and walked off to finish the dishes. He smiled at her retreating back – a day didn't go by he didn't thank his kind masters for rescuing his granddaughter and returning her.

He looked at the thick stack of parchments by his wheelchair. His book on the life history of the Potters was finally finished. It started out being hand written by himself, in neat and tidy characters, but as age caught up with the elf, he changed over to a dictation quill. It contained family trees, official records, amusing anecdotes – everything Tippy could give his beloved master. Tippy had found old friends of the Potters to interview, naturally he spoke long with portraits in Potter Manor, and did his very best to provide The Chosen One with the ancestry he had been long denied.

With a feeble wave of his ancient hand the elf levitated the thick pile of parchments and placed the final page on the bottom of the stack. His personal favorite chapter was the one devoted to The-Boy-Who-

Lived, who overcame terrible odds and yet grew into a loving and caring wizard who defeated the Dark Lord. That chapter was not yet finished, and wouldn't be for many more years. But it would be someone else's job – his part in the book was over.

He steered the chair – the same one made by his Mistress for him years ago, over to the window and gazed at the grounds. It was strange, but he could swear there were two people standing out there, waving at him. But who could it be and why? Why not ring the bell and come in? As he sat there, squinting and pondering, the pair of humans suddenly came into focus, sharp and clear. It was Master James and Mistress Lily! And next to them, his beloved wife Giddy! Still so handsome and beautiful! And behind them were Master James' parents, his first Masters!

Then Tippy understood. His book was finished – they had come to take him home.

## **The End**

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*Final author notes:*

*The most common complaint about this story has been the lack of conflict in Harry's life. Honestly, I agree. I tried to write in major character deaths, a kidnapping or two, and a bit of angst in the story, but I just couldn't make it work. It does work better if you realize all the conflict poor Harry endured in books 1-5, and use this as simply an alternative 6th book.*

*My major drive for this story was to show a Harry that used his head more than his temper and luck. Harry, growing up with muggles, didn't grow up with the wizard's prejudice. Growing up abused and unloved, he found accepting love from a goblin much easier – the child craved a parent. By embracing the Goblins first, and then the elves, etc, Harry gains the maturity and healing he needed, and gets the knowledge and power that Riddle knew not.*

*I'm sorry that so many people turned out 'good' in the end. But how many truly evil people have you met in your life? I think most people,*

*given a chance, are basically good. Harry has a talent of bringing that out in a person.*

*Many folks didn't like Dumbledore getting off 'easily' and croaking by a heart attack – they wanted a good old-fashioned battle with Harry opening a can of whoop-butt on him. Actually, I did write it that way at first, but changed it for a couple reasons. First, I felt it was wonderfully ironic that the 'most powerful wizard in the world' should die of a muggle ailment. And most importantly, I did it to spare Harry and his friends. Very few people in the wizard's world understand what Albus had become – 96 of the population still see him as a great hero for the light. It would be very hard for Harry to kill him and keep himself out of Azkaban.*

***Thank you to everyone who took the time to leave reviews and comments. And deep gratitude and thanks to my betas Spacegal19 and Romulus Magnus. They made this story so much more enjoyable.***